

House Divided

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House Divided

by [spaceliquid](#)

Summary

It all started with the Jettwins.

When their Decepticon coding begins to grow more active, Optimus Prime has to seek help from the last person he wants to see: the captive Decepticon leader. Megatron names the price for his cooperation, and it is nothing like Optimus expected.

However, when an old enemy rears its head, the terms of that mutually beneficial bargain might alter significantly.

Notes

Right when I thought that I can rest a little after writing one multichaptered monster, my inspiration decided that rest was for wimps and another TFA post-finale fic was just what this world needed.

But hey, there is never enough MegOP. :3

The first part has a Silence of the Lambs thing going on (minus cannibalism XD), which belongs to Thomas Harris.

Special thanks to Qui, who is awesome. Many of this fic's ideas were born in our

conversations.

Part I, Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part I. It Is Hard to Find a Good Conversation Partner

Chapter 1.

It all started with the Jettwins – or rather, with Acting Head of Intelligence Cliffjumper’s complaint.

“I get hundreds of reports on spotted Decepticon activity,” he stated during a Council meeting. “Seventy percent of them are sightings of those two punks flying around. Twenty percent are the result of the citizens’ overactive imagination, and ten percent refer to Optimus Prime and his jetpack.”

Optimus shifted at this notion, trying to control his embarrassment; he had to display confidence and restrain in order to be taken seriously by Cybertron’s ruling body. He wasn’t used to being present at meeting of such a high caliber, but as a hero of Cybertron he was invited to every session after his return.

The Acting Magnus (by the Allspark, there were too many people with “acting” in their titles, how devastating was the damage done to them by a failed Decepticon operation!) just sneered and held his more than impressive chin up.

“It only demonstrates that our people are alert to the danger. You continue sorting these reports, Cliffjumper.”

“Sir,” the red minibot lowered his head, looking at the Magnus sullenly, which, combined with his horns and a stubborn tone, made him resemble a young bovine from Earth fauna, “I would not lie to you: the Intelligence Service is in the state of disarray. The traitor Longarm – Shockwave – deleted as much information from our databases as he could before his escape. We are still working on bringing at least some order into our affairs and files, and the flood of reports only makes it worse. We have to look into every single one of them – on your order, sir.”

“Well, proceed with doing that, Cliffjumper!” Sentinel was becoming annoyed.

“We don’t have enough personnel to give every task the required attention! My agents are buried under tons of unnecessary paperwork and worthless reports!” Cliffjumper’s temper was as short as Sentinel’s, and Optimus felt that it was the right moment to stop the impending quarrel.

“The populace is scared,” he spoke up, attempting to sound as peaceful as possible. “Maybe we can stop the propaganda videos now? Sentinel Magnus, sir,” he added, knowing how his friend loved to be referred as such. “It will make people a little calmer, and they won’t be taking flying Autobots for the Decepticons.”

“Absolutely not!” Sentinel, although pleased by Optimus’s flattery, narrowed his optics. “People must be fully aware of the danger and ready to contribute everything to the Autobot cause! Videos

serve as a good warning.”

Optimus made a serious effort not to curve his lips in distaste. He agreed with Ratchet: Sentinel’s measures could rather be called fear-mongering than a warning for civilians to keep their eyes open, but it would be unwise to tell that to the Acting Magnus himself. He might be seen as naïve and too rebellious by some, but the young Prime wasn’t stupid; he knew what to say and when.

“Nevertheless, you can’t overlook the fact that you’re weakening our already impaired Intelligence Service,” Alpha Trion said from his seat. “During the wartime this puts us all in grave danger.”

“Fine! Then I forbid all flying for the Autobots unless it’s a military operation!”

It was Optimus’s turn to be taken aback.

“But what about training and honing our skills?”

“Use VR simulators,” Sentinel snapped. Apparently, he was sick of this debate. “The twins are quite good at it, you should take lessons from them, Optimus.” The fact that Optimus was ‘quite good’ at VR simulated battles was graciously overlooked by the Acting Magnus.

Thus the dispute came to its end, and Sentinel’s order was made a law.

For the first two weeks it seemed like nothing changed – except that the flood of Decepticon activity reports gradually ceased, and Cliffjumper could finally concentrate on more important matters. But then Optimus began to notice things – small things, really, but alarming all the same.

Jetfire and Jetstorm were becoming restless. Once carefree and upbeat, the twins appeared more and more solemn with every day, expressions looking alien on their faces. They were wandering the halls and passages of Fortress Maximus, only rarely exchanging jokes, and even these jests lacked the usual energy. Even the VR competitions against each other or Optimus didn’t entertain them that much. They did pick up fights in reality though, but those fights took a rather malicious turn.

Optimus’s patience wore off when one day he had to drag the hissing twins away from a soldier whom they were practically demolishing with their fists and feet.

“What has come over you!?” Optimus shouted, grasping them by their collars. “This is an Autobot, a friend!”

“He started it!” Jetfire yelled, squirming in Optimus’s hold and trying to kick him in the knee.

“Yeah! Call us Decepticon scum! We show him Decepticon scum!” Jetstorm added, clutching at Optimus’s hand.

“Even if he said those things, it’s not the reason to beat up a fellow soldier!” Optimus frowned, looking the twins over. “What would Sentinel think of you? You’re disgracing him with such behavior!”

Surprisingly enough, this had the desired effect: the twins stopped struggling and exchanged horrified glances. Optimus never understood why, but despite all their stunts they held Sentinel in extremely high regard.

“Oh...”

“We didn’t mean it.”

“You... Not tell sir about this?”

Optimus glared at them for some moments more, but then shook his head.

“I will have to inform him about this incident, but how I will do it will depend on you. Go to your quarters; I’ll join you after I take this bot to the medbay... and then we will talk.”

“Alright,” Optimus sat down on one berth while Jetfire and Jetstorm settled on the second. At least they had the decency to look guilty. “Now let’s talk about your latest behavior. I noticed how it changed. If there is something bothering or affecting you it’s time you explained it; we can’t have Elite Guard officers beating up Autobots.”

The twins exchanged glances again, as if evaluating whether Optimus was trustworthy enough, and then began:

“Well, you see, sir...”

“We just feel weird.”

“It’s in chest... like a hole.”

“Pain, but not really pain.”

“We don’t know what it is. No wound there, we checked.”

Optimus frowned.

“You feel pain, but you didn’t go to the medic?”

The Jettwins shrugged simultaneously.

“No wound,” Jetfire elaborated.

“It doesn’t matter,” Optimus sighed. He was used to dealing with immature or overconfident teammates, but it didn’t mean he wasn’t tired of it. “We’re going to see Ratchet. Right now.”

Optimus found the old field medic where Ratchet spent the most of his time: with Omega Supreme. Maybe the Prime had to bring the twins to the Elite Guard medic – they had a very well-equipped hospital – but for some reason Optimus wanted to take counsel from someone he really trusted. Not that he didn’t trust the Elite Guard medics... Okay, it was just a spontaneous decision, Optimus wasn’t obliged to explain his every action to himself.

“What can I say,” Ratchet declared after he finished with his check-up and ushered the bored twins to ‘play outside’, as he put it, “physically they are perfectly healthy. I didn’t find anything that could be causing the symptoms they described. However...”

“However?” Optimus urged, uncomfortable with the pause.

“It seems that their Decepticon coding has become more active,” Ratchet looked up straight into Optimus’s optics, which darkened at the implication.

“They are Autobots.”

“They have Autobot sparks, yes, but a good deal of their coding is Decepticon. And it is acting strangely. I can’t tell you more, since I’m not a specialist on Decepticon physiology; you’d need to consult a real Decepticon – or somebody from the Ministry of Science who implanted the coding in the first place.”

Optimus looked at the vidscreen that showed footage from the grounds around Omega Supreme; the twins were jumping between Omega’s hands, pretending to be escaping from his clutches. The giant shipformer indulged them, making low rumbling sounds.

“Although I would recommend you to keep this information from the Ministry of Science,” Ratchet added, and Optimus turned back to him, confused.

“Why?”

The old medic averted his optics.

“Sometimes I have a feeling that along with deleting his emotions Perceptor deleted his ethics as well. I read the materials on creating these flying Autobots,” he made a vague gesture in the vidscreen’s direction. “Jetfire and Jetstorm used to be refinery workers who got seriously damaged in an accident. They were chosen for this dubious and dangerous experiment because they were expendable. Nobody asked them for consent. And I fear that nobody will think twice before terminating them if they deem the twins a threat. I believe that activating Decepticon coding can definitely be counted as a threat.”

“You think they... might turn hostile?” Optimus shut his optics for a moment. “No, I refuse to think this. They are Autobots. They are basically newsparks! Look at them, Ratchet! Do they look like vicious warbuilds to you?”

“No,” the medic shook his head. “But they might to others.”

Call us Decepticon scum, Jetstorm’s voice echoed in Optimus’s head.

“You’d better keep quiet about all of this,” Ratchet said, taking away his tools, “and keep an eye on those kids. Don’t worry so much,” the old medic patted his shoulder and offered him a small smile. “We’ll figure something out.”

But Optimus couldn’t stop worrying. Every time he looked at the twins, fragments of his conversation with Ratchet popped up in his mind. Their behavior didn’t change for better; if anything, it became worse. They were growing grumpy, their normal light-hearted boasting and pranks turning into something not so harmless. Complaints from the other soldiers were reaching Sentinel’s audio receptors, and the only fortunate thing was that the Acting Magnus waved them off... for now.

The Jettwins weren’t his subordinates, and he didn’t even know them that much... but Optimus couldn’t leave fellow Autobots in trouble. He had done this once; it would never happen again.

But what could he do? The Prime chose to heed Ratchet’s warning concerning the Ministry of Science; however, he still needed information that could help him understand just what was wrong. And the only place to get it was the Ministry, or...

You’d need to consult a real Decepticon, Ratchet’s voice murmured.

No. No, this was out of question. But the more he chased this thought away, the more reasonable it sounded. Seriously, why not? They had Decepticon prisoners; Optimus, as a Prime, had authorization to speak with them, and if they decided to tell on him, people would rather believe Optimus than the traitorous slagger who had a grudge against him. And his need was becoming dire...

So, whom *could* he ask?

The Starscream clones were discarded right away: interrogation reports that Optimus studied proved that they didn't know much about being *Cybertronian*, let alone Decepticon. Blitzwing couldn't be trusted with anything: with his three changing personalities he had become a nightmare for Autobot interrogators. Right when they began getting somewhere with Icy he switched to Hothead, and when Hothead was pissed off enough to spill some intel in a fit of rage, Blitzwing's Random persona took the reins, turning all potential information into gibberish.

Then there were their three most prized captives: Megatron, Shockwave – the double agent who posed as Longarm Prime, the Head of Autobot Intelligence, and Lugnut – the consort of General Strika, who was in command of Decepticon forces in Megatron's absence.

Lugnut was useless; a fanatically loyal zealot, he was speaking of nothing but the greatness of his 'bold and glorious' leader. Shockwave was equally loyal, but expressed it in a different way: he remained silent, not reacting to any attempts to make him talk. Optimus doubted Shockwave'd change this for his sake; besides, he wasn't really eager to see the bot who put Ultra Magnus into coma.

This left Optimus with only one option. One he desperately didn't want to take – but one that, it seems, he had to accept.

So in the evening before his nearest day off Optimus transformed into vehicle mode and set off to Kaon, where their top security prison was located.

Optimus had been in Kaon before – twice, actually: on a school trip and on a more informative excursion during his Academy years. They visited the museum of the Great War and were lectured on Decepticon urban planning and fortifications. Optimus remembered Kaon as a dark, gloomy mass of hulking buildings, uncomfortably spacey halls and spiky decorations. The once-grand capital of Cybertron's warrior race was still lying in ruins; the Autobots never populated the city, just cleaned the rubble off the streets. The only isles of life were the museum and the Trypticon Prison.

Now, after meeting the real Decepticons on the battlefield, Optimus believed that he understood the city a bit more. The buildings seemed gigantic, but not only to impose: they were erected for mechs much larger than Autobots. The spikes and spires mimicked claws and fangs some Decepticons possessed. But what stroke Optimus the most was desolation. Before, he automatically associated Decepticons with death; they were the boogeymen homeroom teachers were scaring Autobot newsparks with, so the empty streets and the dusty air seemed fitting for them. But now Optimus knew that there was nothing supernatural or particularly monstrous about the 'cons: they were just an enemy race, that's all, and although they inhabited this place long ago, now Kaon was just a ghost city unsuitable for life.

Trypticon prison used to be a fortress during the war, but now its mighty walls and the moat surrounding it served against their former masters. After crossing the bridge, Optimus transformed to his root mode and went up the stairs to the great doors leading to the main hall.

He was met by the prison's warden, who was informed about the Prime's arrival and was positively thrilled to meet the national hero. He was accompanied by an armed convoy consisting of four guards.

"The facility itself is run by the Mini-Cons," the warden explained as he was walking Optimus to the detention levels. "We Autobots are here to monitor the prisoners and guard them, but everything inside is controlled by the little rascals. Apparently, their simple processors proved to be incapable of lying or being bribed, and I've got to give them this: when they concentrate on their task, they are freaking unstoppable. There hasn't been a single jailbreak on their watch!" he declared as proudly as if it was his personal achievement.

He stopped before the doors that had 'Cell blocks 400-499' written on them.

"Here we are," the warden smirked while the security system scanned their energy signatures. "It will let you pass, but we'll have to stay here – we are not allowed inside unless absolutely necessary. I'll leave the guards before the doors in case you need them. Good luck!"

"Thank you," the young Prime nodded absent-mindedly and entered the detention sector, heavy doors shutting immediately behind his back.

He stopped for a moment to take a breath, as Sari would say. Here he was... Mere moments away from facing the 'cons. There was no way back. He had to appear collected and calm; he was in control, he required information and he was going to get it.

A series of short beeps came from below, and Optimus looked down. He was met with the sight of a tiny bot that was, apparently, his new guide: short, round and bright orange in color, he was staring at Optimus with beady yellow optics on a faceless head.

"Um... Hello," Optimus offered a strained smile. "I am Optimus Prime. You should have been informed about my arrival. I'm here to interrogate the Decepticon leader, Megatron."

{It is known,} the Mini-Con replied in binary. {This one is Sureshock, Communications representative. Purpose: give you instructions.}

While Optimus was listening, he couldn't help but study Sureshock, hoping that his curiosity wasn't that obvious – but even if it was, the Mini-Con most likely wouldn't care. Nobody knew for sure who these little creatures were; their place of origins was one of Cybertron's two moons, and their sparks were neither Autobot, nor Decepticon. They were a little tribe that aligned itself with the Autobots during the latest stages of the Great War, and proved to be quite resourceful despite their size (for instance, Optimus was fairly sure that Sureshock could stand his own against him in case of emergency). They spoke only in binary, and their inability to convey emotions freaked most Autobots out. However, the same neutral and strict approach made them perfect caretakers for Trypticon prison: they didn't listen to the inmates' promises or offers, and they were smart enough to stop any suspicious activity.

Finally, the Mini-Con's lecture ended, and he led Optimus down the corridor to the door labeled 'Cell block 456'.

"Thank you for your help, Sureshock," Optimus inclined his head. "Now, I would like to have some privacy. No video or audio feed and no supervision." He really didn't need anyone to learn about the Jettwins' problem.

Sureshock beeped a couple of times, assessing Optimus's honesty, but, fortunately, was satisfied with the results.

{ Will be granted, Optimus Prime. }

“Thank you,” the Autobot repeated, but allowed himself to express relief only when Sureshock left, locking the door behind him. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, the Mini-Con unnerved him.

Cell block 456 was empty except for three cells in the very end of it. Before walking down the corridor, Optimus moved to the control panel near the door. The vidscreen above it monitored the block’s occupants.

The first thing he noticed was how small the cells were. Optimus had never been to Autobot prisons before, and although he knew that according to the Council’s policies the cells had to be small enough to not allow the inmates to transform, he didn’t quite imagine how it looked in real life. The Decepticons could barely stand or turn there, and the only pieces of furniture that fit inside were simple narrow benches good only for sitting. Not that there was any space for lying down.

The Decepticons’ injuries hadn’t been repaired – this Optimus knew as well, but knowing and seeing were completely different things. Megatron appeared particularly battered, which wasn’t surprising considering the severity of his last battle with Optimus; what *was* surprising was that he didn’t seem to get any medical attention except for basic first aid performed by Ratchet on Earth. He still missed huge chunks of armor, not to mention a nasty gash in the chestplate that bared delicate inner circuitry. But this was logical; it would be foolish to nurse the greatest war criminal back to his full health and strength. Right?

All three Decepticons seemed alert; they had obviously heard someone enter. Lugnut and Shockwave’s optics were focused on the part of the passageway they could see from their cells; Megatron was staring right at the camera.

Optimus suppressed an involuntary shiver, raised his hand to the control panel and switched the settings for Lugnut and Shockwave’s cells from forcefield to full enclosure. Heavy sound- and laserproof shutters descended on the cells’ front, cutting them from the passageway. Optimus had no desire for the two Decepticon officers to listen in on his conversation with their leader.

Whom, frankly speaking, Optimus had no desire to see either.

However, it wasn’t about his wishes; it was about his friends’ safety, and so the Prime gritted his dental plates, straightened his back and marched forward.

“My, my, if it isn’t Optimus Prime! What do I owe to such a visit?”

“I see that you’ve remembered my name.” Optimus stopped in front of the Decepticon warlord’s cell, face stern and controlled.

“I have,” Megatron half-shut his optics, expression gracious, but there was fierceness lurking beneath the pleasant façade. “I won’t forget it, although it isn’t necessarily a good thing for you.”

This was definitely a threat. Optimus’s lips thinned, but it was not the time to exchange verbal jabs with the Decepticon. Unfortunately, the young Prime had to get him cooperative.

“I’ve come to ask you a couple of questions,” he began neutrally.

“A waste of time, then. What makes you think you’ll be more successful than your predecessors?”

“Because I’m not going to ask for your troops’ dislocations or your security codes.” Optimus crossed his arms, looking straight into Megatron’s optics. “I’m going to ask for information on the

way you warbuilds function.”

“So that your science and medical teams can learn how we tick and eviscerate us better? I think I’ll refuse.”

“So that I can help my friends deal with their Decepticon coding.” Optimus stepped closer to the forcefield separating him from Megatron. The warlord looked colossal even while seated and confined, but Optimus wasn’t intimidated by their difference in size anymore; he fought this mech and won. “This is a personal request, Megatron. Strictly off the record.”

“The bots in question being those peculiar flying Autobots, I presume,” Megatron tilted his head slightly, thinking. “And why, pray tell, would I assist you or any of my enemies, Optimus Prime?”

The Autobot’s mouth twisted in frustration.

“I don’t know, in order for me to get you medical help, perhaps?” This came out more aggressive than he intended, but, apparently, it appealed to Megatron. The Decepticon laughed, the sound filled with genuine mirth, and when he looked back at Optimus, the red optics were twinkling.

“I have a better idea, little Prime. How about we play a game? I will answer those questions of yours, in as much detail as I can without harming the Decepticon cause. And in return for every one of your questions,” he smirked, “you will answer one of mine.”

Optimus opened his mouth, but Megatron raised his cuffed hands before the Autobot could give an angry retort.

“Don’t worry, I won’t pry for anything of strategic importance. Those questions will be about *you*. Personal questions.”

Optimus gaped at the warlord, dumbfounded.

“Why. In the world. Would you need. *That?*”

“Maybe I want to learn more about the mech who defeated me.” Megatron leaned on the wall, pose growing more relaxed. “Or maybe I’m just bored. There is nothing to do here, I can’t talk to my subordinates properly with the guards listening in, and it is rather hard to have an engaging conversation with interrogators. So what do you say, Autobot? Do we have a deal?”

Optimus hesitated, mulling over his choices. The idea of sharing personal information with the lord of the Decepticons was far from attractive, and he was suddenly scared by the perspective of what Megatron could ask. On the other hand, it was harmless to the Autobot cause, and he really needed information on the warbuild coding... His friends needed him. He made Megatron cooperate; this was a chance he couldn’t miss.

“I won’t answer if it might put other Autobots in jeopardy,” Optimus uttered slowly. “I will omit all details I consider vital for the Autobot cause. If I learn that you mentioned our conversations to any other mech, they will come to end immediately. If you agree with these conditions...” Optimus made a short pause, trying to calm down his fuel tanks. “Then yes. We have a deal.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope to keep my weekly update schedule, but I'm not promising anything. Real life

has become busier lately, so we'll see how it goes.

Also I won't be imitating accents. I do try to properly transcribe the Jettwins' manner of speech (not sure if I succeeded, though).

Part I, Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Very well. What did you want to know?” Megatron crossed his legs, finding a more comfortable pose. Optimus felt a bit stupid just standing there under the Decepticon’s scrutiny and made a mental note to bring a chair next time.

Although he hoped there wouldn’t be a next time.

“The Autobot flyers began to express discomfort, both physical and mental. They describe it as ‘pain, but not really’,” Optimus cringed at the indistinct phrasing. “Because of this they’ve become restless, short-tempered. Medical scan discovered no problems, but their implanted Decepticon coding seems to be more active. We suppose it is the source of the twins’ troubles, so I want to understand what’s wrong with them and how to fix it.”

Optimus realized that such a dry account couldn’t possibly give Megatron much to work with, but the young Prime was already feeling guilty for betraying even this amount of information; the Decepticon could devise a way to use these facts against them, could trick Optimus into hurting the twins, could...

Oh, but there was no sense in musing; Optimus had passed the point of no return, and really, it’s not that he didn’t consider these possibilities before. Of course, Megatron couldn’t be trusted. But, sadly, Optimus had no choice. It was either this – or just sitting idly, watching Jetfire and Jetstorm lose more and more of themselves.

“Hm,” Megatron tapped a finger against his knee in thought. “Before I make a guess, tell me: you created them by installing Decepticon coding, correct? Whom did you use as a template?”

Optimus hesitated, but Megatron interrupted his pondering.

“I don’t need a name, just the frametype. Seeker or not?”

“It was Starscream,” Optimus confessed somewhat wearily. This didn’t seem like vital information anyway.

“A Seeker, then,” Megatron nodded. “I must compliment your scientists; cracking a Seeker’s flight coding and then successfully implanting it into Autobot bodies is an operation worth of praise. Do they fly often enough?”

“The twins?” Optimus searched for a properly uninformative response. “Why does it matter?”

“Because, based on your description, I can suppose that they are suffering from ground sickness.” At seeing Optimus’s blank face Megatron sighed and started explaining. “You see, there are various frametypes among the Decepticons. There are heavy-hitters, like Lugnut; middle-range flyers, like myself; and then there are Seekers, forged for long-distance reconnaissance and swift aerial strikes. All Decepticons are able to fly, but Seekers literally *need* it. Being grounded for long periods of time – especially in confined spaces – puts a huge stress on their processor; at first they grow wild and uncontrollable, then they become delirious, with hallucinations and all. Then they finally lose all contact with reality and smash against every wall until the torment becomes too much, so they claw their own spark out.” Megatron peered into Optimus’s widened optics and smirked. “During the Great War most Seekers preferred to commit suicide rather than be sent to

Autobot stockades.”

Optimus cursed himself for the chill that ran down his spine, and opted for an offense instead.

“Why aren’t you affected, then? Do you non-Seekers get groundsick?”

“We do, but to a much lesser extent,” Megatron shrugged. “It feels like an itch you cannot scratch, but you learn to live with it. As for your hybrid colleagues, curing them is pretty easy: just make them fly more often. That should do the trick.”

“Yeah... Sounds easy,” Optimus murmured. Except it wasn’t easy, with Sentinel Magnus’s order prohibiting all flying unless in battle. But he wasn’t going to share this with Megatron.

“Anyway, if you’re done with questioning me, I would like to receive my payment.”

Optimus’s head jerked up. Oh, right. Payment. They had a deal, and it was Optimus’s turn to answer Megatron’s query. Which he couldn’t skip because he promised, and because he might require Megatron’s advice in the future if this one proved to be useful.

“Fine,” he muttered through gritted dental plates. “What do you want to know? I’m not that interesting of a person, mind you.”

“That I will judge by myself,” Megatron said sternly, and Optimus was surprised by the seriousness in his tone... and gratitude it made him feel. Wait, where did that come from?

“So tell me, Optimus Prime...” Megatron pronounced his name slowly and distinctly, as if tasting the syllables rolling off his tongue, and this, once again, sent a shiver through Optimus’s servos. On the other hand, his spark warmed in grim satisfaction: at least now the Decepticon leader won’t deride him as another ‘little Autobot’. “Judging by your actions in battle, you had the Autobot Military Academy training, yet you commanded a team of maintenance bots. How did that happen?”

“I was expelled from the Academy.”

Optimus was sure that Megatron’s next wish would be to know why, and he was at loss. He wasn’t prepared, he couldn’t answer this question without lying, not now, not like this. It was too intimate, too charged with controversial emotions and painful memories to bring it up in front of an enemy. But, to Optimus’s shock, Megatron didn’t go in that direction. Instead, he asked a different thing:

“Why did you choose a military career in the first place?”

Optimus was nearly overwhelmed with the rush of relief that coursed through him. Really, there was something wrong about feeling gratitude towards a war criminal not once, but twice during one conversation.

He decided to ignore it and concentrate on talking.

“History was my favorite subject in school, especially history of the Great War,” Optimus smiled involuntarily at the fond memories. “I used to spend all my free time reading books and watching movies about it, and I imagined myself following the footsteps of great Autobot heroes. Yes, I guess I wanted to be a hero,” he added quietly, Ultra Magnus’s words (“*You are not programmed to be a hero*”) resonating in his audials. Ultra Magnus was right; there was much more to heroics than childish delusions.

“For the glory?” Megatron’s soft voice made Optimus snap out of his reflections.

“I wanted to help people!” he argued, but lowered his tone immediately. “Well... The glory too,” he had to confess. “Of course I dreamed of standing before the cheering crowd one day, Ultra Magnus praising me and calling me the savior of Cybertron, but who didn't?”

“And now that you had that honor,” Megatron's red optics were glued to him, unblinking, “are you satisfied?”

“I...” Optimus shifted. “I am glad we managed to avert the crisis. I am glad we managed to defeat you. But it is not about satisfaction or personal victories. I lost a friend,” he said harshly, meeting the Decepticon's gaze. “Prowl died, so that we could live. He is the true hero, not me. The crowd should be cheering for him, but no amount of cheers will bring him back.”

And it is your fault he is gone, Optimus wanted to growl, but bit his tongue. Blame was as meaningless as praise, and both tasted like ashes.

“So what *is* a hero? What makes a person one?”

It was strange – to look in his adversary's optics not with rage or desperation, but with calm clarity, and yet this was what filled Optimus right now – as if Prowl's ghostly arms were still holding him in their soothing embrace.

“A hero is the one who sacrifices something of his own – be it a part of himself or his very spark – in order to help others. A true hero fulfills his duty and doesn't ask for anything in return.”

Optimus had doubts about Megatron's recommendations, but he got a chance to alleviate them sooner than he expected. Fortress Maximus's training grounds met him with a thick trail of smoke and Sentinel's yelling.

“You blew up the VR!? Again!? Do you have any idea how much this machine costs!?”

Jetfire and Jetstorm, who usually were quick to obey anything Sentinel said, didn't even care to feign guilt this time.

“Not our fault,” Jetstorm barked, turning his head away.

“It was dumb,” Jetfire added just as insolently, arms akimbo.

Sentinel looked like he was ready to blow a gasket, and Optimus hurried up to interfere.

“Maybe it will be cheaper to let them train in real world?” he suggested, not quite able to believe his luck. “Just not in the civilian areas.”

“Or maybe they need to be treated like impudent rust buckets they are!” Sentinel shouted, ever ready to aim his anger at Optimus. “Maybe I should ground them like unruly sparklings!”

Oh no, bad turn.

“So that they can annoy you more? You are the Magnus, Sentinel,” Optimus said, omitting the 'Acting' part for diplomacy's sake. “You have many things to worry about besides two Elite Guard warriors; you have entire Cybertron to care for! Let me deal with them.”

Optimus wasn't Sentinel's old friend for nothing; he knew the other bot's sensitive spots well. And just as planned, Sentinel's face beamed up at the mention of his importance – and Optimus's

unimportance.

“Fine, you can have them if you want. Used to mingling with insubordinate slagheads, eh, Optimus?” Sentinel elbowed him and winked. Normally Optimus would've risen to the defense of his teammates (who were, doubtlessly, the subject of the Acting Magnus's jab), but he couldn't afford an argument with Sentinel right now.

Instead, Optimus turned to the twins, who were demonstrating indifference so hard that it almost made the Prime laugh. Decepticon coding or not, these two were still ingenuous like newsparks.

“You heard your Magnus,” Optimus said, smiling at them. “Follow me; we're going flying.”

Megatron's advice really worked: when Optimus carefully asked the twins how they were feeling in a couple of days, Jetfire and Jetstorm's reply was a chirpy “fine”, followed by two identically dazzling smiles which lacked the malice that was tainting them of late. Optimus couldn't help but smile in return, and he continued smiling ever as he watched Jetfire and Jetstorm perform their stunts in the air; their happiness was so contagious that Optimus couldn't stop himself from joining them.

Flying enchanted him, and sometimes he was a bit scared of just how much he loved it. Flight was a Decepticon thing; proper Autobots should stay with their feet on the ground. And yet, from the moment when Optimus first tested his jetpack without crashing into anything, he knew that nothing could compare to that wonderful sensation of speed and freedom. Oh, he understood the 'ground sickness' pretty well, despite his Autobot nature: being stripped of the ability to fly made even him dispirited. For creatures born for flight it had to be agonizing... And enemies or not, but Optimus couldn't deny that a Seeker in flight was an epitome of grace and power; even Starscream's clones, 'cheap knock-off' as Sentinel called them, had the same wild beauty to them.

By the Allspark, Starscream's clones!

Optimus stopped in mid-air, tumbling in an awkward mishmash of limbs. Starscream's clones were in jail too. Imprisoned far earlier than the Jettwins were forbidden to fly.

“Being grounded for long periods of time – especially in confined spaces – puts a huge stress on their processor,” Megatron's voice rumbled in his head. *“Until the torment becomes too much, so they claw their own spark out.”*

Energon cold in his fuel lines, Optimus dove down. In a few clicks he was already folding his jetpack and running to the Ministry of Science's building, where they were studying the cloning process.

“The clones?” Perceptor's emotionless monotone added on to the clinically cold environment of the laboratory, making the question sound even harsher and more indifferent. “Unfortunately, we had to cease observations, since our subjects exhibited increasingly violent behavior. It was regressing rapidly, aggression was aimed both at the outer world and at themselves. We have hypothesized this to be a degenerate side effect of the cloning process. You have facts that support a different theory?” His optics' sharp and blank stare pierced Optimus, and the young Prime suppressed a desire to squirm.

“No,” he replied, hoping that his tone was convincing. “But where are they now? Are they...”

“They are alive, if that is what interests you,” Perceptor reached for one of his monitors and switched it to show a chamber with the clones lying motionless on the slabs. “We have put them into stasis when their behavior became too erratic in order to avoid serious damage to their systems. We will activate them again once we find the means to correct their condition.” The scientist's blank stare fixed on Optimus. “If you have anything to contribute, your aid would be appreciated.”

For a brief moment Optimus considered sharing his information with Perceptor, but something stopped him. He didn't need any uncomfortable questions about the source of his knowledge... but there was something else, too. For some reason he was wary about providing the Ministry of Science with any additional facts on flightframes' physiology. Ratchet's warnings resurfaced in his head under Perceptor's scrutiny, and not that Optimus wanted to cover up for his enemies...

But his instincts screamed for caution, and if Prowl taught him anything – it was to trust his instincts.

Sadly, their problems with the Jettwins were only just beginning.

“Their Decepticon coding continues to grow more active,” Ratchet commented after a short check-up. “It is developing and expanding with accumulated experience. Sure, their demeanor is not as... well, Decepticon-ish as it was, but I can't predict how it'll go from now on - or how to stop it. Hate to say that, but we could really use Sari's abilities right now.”

Optimus sighed.

“If only there was a decent reason to bring Jetfire and Jetstorm to Earth without raising suspicions...”

Ratchet chuckled.

“I'm afraid that, knowing how much our Acting Magnus hates that planet, this would be the most challenging task.”

They sat in silence for a while, each remembering the blue organic world that had become the second home for them, and friends they met there. They knew Sari for the tiniest amount of time by Cybertronian measures, but both missed her dearly.

Sari traveled to Cybertron with them after their victory in Detroit, but, despite the girl's wish to stay and learn more about her origins, they had to send her back. A technorganic wasn't welcome on Sentinel's Cybertron, especially considering his more than unhappy encounter with Blackarachnia. But neither Optimus, nor Ratchet found the courage to tell the excited girl that she wasn't wanted on her second homeworld.

“Somebody needs to protect Earth in case the Decepticons decide to wreak vengeance,” Optimus told her on the fateful day when they announced the news to Sari. “And as far as we know, some of them are still on Earth – like the Constructicons or that female Starscream clone.”

“Oh come on, guys, it's not fair!” Sari tightened her fists. “I've just arrived! I'm on a real alien planet! One that holds the key to the mystery of my birth, no less! And you tell me to be a good girl and go to my room?” Her Autobot-blue eyes (or were they optics?) glimmered. “You are my friends,” she said quietly, “and I want to help you. You saved my home; it's my turn to help save yours.”

"Oh, Sari," Ratchet offered her a hand, and the girl switched off her jetpack to stand in his open palm, like she used to do in the past. "If it was that easy..."

"There is something else," Optimus added, deliberately not looking at her.

"What? What is it?" Sari's voice filled with concern as the atmosphere became even more uncomfortable.

Optimus met Ratchet's optics and nodded, feeling like a coward.

"I... studied your technorganic biology and spark," Ratchet mumbled, finally raising his gaze at Sari. "Despite the decent amount of organic tissue, I have all reasons to believe that you will have a Cybertronian lifespan."

"But... that's cool, right?" Sari grinned, but her smile faded at the sight of her friends' solemn faces. "Right?"

"Yes," Optimus agreed. "You have a Cybertronian lifespan... But your father does not."

Sari froze. The silence that hanged over the room was so heavy that Ratchet had to cough before speaking again.

"Isaac Sumdac is one hundred percent human," he said with uncharacteristic gentleness, "and he is already nearing his old age. This is why we are suggesting you go to Earth for now. You have an eternity with us ahead of you... And only about twenty Earth years with him."

It was a cruel thing to say, it really was. But, watching Sari's face contort and sharing, co-experiencing every bit of pain with her, Optimus also felt liberated... Like a rust-infested wound that was finally cleaned.

Sari left for Earth two days later. Bumblebee went with her - "to look after her", as he put it, but Optimus found it more likely that it'd be Sari who'd look after Bumblebee. She wiped a tear when they were bidding farewell before the space bridge, but as she hugged Optimus he heard her whisper:

"Thank you."

"Blocking the space bridge connection to Earth was a bit too much, if you ask me," Ratchet's gruff voice distracted Optimus from his memories. "'For security measures' my aft, ha! I say, our Acting Magnus has a couple o'screws loose in his head. Did you hear that he wanted to increase the military budget even more?"

"Yes," Optimus rubbed his nasal ridge, a disgusting feeling of embarrassment for being Sentinel's friend crawling in his tanks. "And now poor Bulkhead has to spend his days at energon farms, trying to urge people to produce more while leaving almost nothing for themselves."

"A scapegoat's task," Ratchet scowled. "I do not envy poor Bulkhead. I do not envy any of us, actually. Sentinel is a sparkling playing a general; he thinks war is a fun endeavor in the name of glory and justice."

"Well, we do fight for the just cause," Optimus commented carefully, but Ratchet let out a bitter laugh and waved his hand.

"I've seen the Great War, kid, and trust me: there was very little justice to it."

Unfortunately, between Optimus's hopes and Ratchet's grim prognoses it was the latter that came to life. While the twins retained their usual cheerful personalities, Optimus was noticing how they were growing more unhinged with every solar cycle. It seemed that they deliberately disobeyed every order given to them, and their optics gleamed with cold curiosity, as if they were testing their superiors. Jazz, who sometimes dealt with the twins when Sentinel was busy (which was nearly all the time), was throwing his hands up in frustration, and Optimus found himself barking at Jetfire and Jetstorm furiously, which didn't bring any fruit and only made the Prime feel ashamed.

He briefly wondered if Megatron was subtly influencing the twins through his recommendations in order to hurt the Autobots from within, but discarded this thought as paranoid. The only thing Optimus did according to Megatron's advice was letting the twins fly, and they flew before with no negative consequences. No, the cause of this awakening Decepticon coding lay somewhere else... Which only made their situation tougher. No matter how Jetfire and Jetstorm behaved, they were still Autobots, friends. They didn't deserve being turned into some vicious Decepticon beasts... and there was only that much time before Sentinel would stop turning a blind eye to their shenanigans. And, knowing the Acting Magnus's temper and his penchant for extreme measures, nothing good would happen to the twins.

The more Optimus pondered over their situation, the closer he came to a solution he didn't want to try... But that he seemed to have to take. Nobody knew what to do with a raging Decepticon coding better than someone who carried it.

After all, it worked the first time, right?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is more of an exposition, but stay tuned for more MegOP interaction next week!

Part I, Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Optimus decided to use his renewed privilege and fly to Kaon instead of driving. He warned all the military posts, but, luckily, it was an overcast day anyway. Optimus rose above the clouds, where he couldn't be seen from the ground, and relied on his automatic navigation system to keep him from straying off the course.

When he pierced the thick blanket of clouds and reached the clear air, he was almost blinded by Hadeen's radiance. Here it always shone brightly; Optimus bathed in the light, and a smile bloomed on his lips, despite the sad reason for this trip. Here all troubles seemed to be left far below, and Optimus's mood improved rapidly. He even indulged in a couple of stunts – just for the fun of it. Once again he mentally thanked Ratchet, Sari and Isaac Sumdac for building him a jetpack; nothing felt better than this, nothing could ever compare to this!

His thoughts drifted to the Decepticons in the Trypticon prison, and Optimus looked around, wondering. Now the sky was empty, an infinite space of freedom for him to explore, but it wasn't always like this. Long ago it was crossed by contrails pointing in all directions, Cybertron's race of warrior flyers ruling the heights. And later, in the days of the Great War, the sky was a perilous place for an Autobot.

What was Megatron thinking on those rare occasions he was allowed to approach a window? Did he feel this faint yearning that he described as an 'itch'? Did he imagine everything Optimus was experiencing right now as the warlord stared at the bare wall of his cell?

Somehow this thought was unpleasant. Optimus frowned and shook his head, chasing it away; Megatron didn't deserve sympathy, not after all he'd done.

His jetpack brought him to Kaon faster than his wheels. When his navigation system beeped, indicating that Kaon was right below, Optimus dove down, into the grey fog of stormy clouds. They parted in front of him when the ground was already very close, and Optimus gasped as he took in the view.

Kaon appeared to be a completely different city from above. When one approached the Decepticon capital by the road, all they saw were dark walls and hulking jagged masses of buildings resembling vicious clawed hands reaching up. But from up here Kaon looked like one of Earth's organic flowers: numerous balconies and terraces surrounded by crowns of unfurling spikes. Autobot cities were covered by sturdy smooth roofs, designed for maximum protection against aerial attacks; the Decepticon city was built to be impregnable from the ground, but easy to access for a flyer. This was a different architecture – not a spooky castle to scare the Autobots away, as Optimus always thought. It was even... beautiful in its own way.

Optimus made a circle over Kaon, spark beating fast with excitement of learning something new, discovering a secret that nobody seemed to remember. However, this wasn't a leisure tour; he had business here.

Sighing with regret, Optimus descended to the steps before Trypticon prison's entrance and detached his jetpack.

“Optimus Prime!” The jail warden went out to meet him just like the last time, the same subtly

sleazy smile playing on his lips. “We've been expecting you! Came to visit our special guest again, huh?” he winked. “Saw you fly over the place; had to keep the automatic defense systems from shooting you.” He laughed and patted Optimus's arm awkwardly, and only then did the Prime realize it was a joke. “What a marvelous invention! Who knew that one day the Autobots will soar like the 'cons, eh? You can leave the jetpack here; don't worry, nothing will happen to it. Leader-1's orders,” the warden shrugged, his oily smile never waning. “The head of the Mini-Cons, that one. Sometimes I could swear he's a real 'con at spark.”

A short bout of nausea washed over Optimus, but he forced the lump in his throat back. Must've been an aftereffect of excessive flying.

Just as the last time, Sureshock accompanied him to the cell block 456 and left promptly, giving Optimus his requested privacy. He shut off Shockwave and Lugnut's cells with a familiar combination on the control panel and took a short pause to organize his thoughts.

Megatron was already waiting for him. He didn't change since their last encounter; even his pose was nearly the same (although he didn't have much variety in this tiny cell), and the gash on his chest bared just as much inner circuitry. Optimus felt a twinge of guilt at this sight, but then again, Megatron refused medical assistance himself, didn't he? He preferred to ask Optimus uncomfortable questions instead.

“Hello, Optimus Prime,” the warlord said pleasantly. “I take it that you need a consultation again?”

“Don't want to waste time, do you?” Optimus mumbled discontentedly. “But yes, as a matter of fact, I do.”

“Then my last advice proved useful?”

“Yes.” The Prime wasn't eager to admit that the Decepticon's contribution had been appreciated, but if he needed Megatron cooperative, stroking his ego was necessary.

“What did go wrong, then?” The warlord leaned on the wall, crossing his arms.

Optimus suppressed a groan. He had to tell the truth, didn't he?

“It appears the Jettwins' Decepticon coding continues to awaken, developing new subroutines and growing stronger. They have become rebellious and hard to control, ignoring orders, picking on their colleagues or outright defying their superiors; they seek to do damage and call it fun. I want to know how to put a stop to that.”

“How to make them into cute docile little Autobots again, huh?” Megatron smirked.

Optimus pursed his lips.

“Call it however you want. I only need answers.” Megatron raised his optic ridges, and Optimus sighed. “Your payment will be according to our agreement.”

The warlord, who was, apparently, waiting for confirmation, nodded.

“Very well. Judging by your descriptions, there is nothing wrong with your twins: as you said, their coding is simply awakening. Basically, they seem to be acting like normal Decepticon newsparks. As your propaganda videos doubtlessly informed you,” he chuckled sardonically, “we warbuilds are aggressive and egotistic by nature. These two are testing you and everyone around them in

order to establish their place in the hierarchy. What you have to do is to show them their place.”

“This sounds... rather cruel.” Optimus shuffled his foot unconsciously, Sentinel's comments about him 'knowing his place' still fresh in his memory.

Megatron shrugged.

“This is reasonable. They are not Autobots anymore, Optimus Prime; they will not listen to those they don't respect, and while fully matured Decepticons are as reasonable as anybody, young ones only respect force. Either you assert your dominance, or they will. If you want them to blend in with the Autobot crowd, you will have to control them.”

“Alright,” Optimus rubbed his temples, giving up. “How do I... 'assert my dominance,' as you put it?”

“Easy: just beat them.”

“What?!” The Prime's EM field burst with indignation.

“Beat them,” Megatron repeated calmly.

“I... I am not beating my subordinates, my friends! This is not the Autobot way.”

“They are not Autobots.”

“It doesn't matter.” Optimus shook his head. “I am not beating them. Give me milder options.”

Megatron regarded him for a klik, expression unreadable, but Optimus didn't falter.

“Alright then,” the corners of the warlord's mouth twitched. “You have your jetpack, right? Try training with them. Challenge them to a sparring several times, preferably in the air, and win. They should accept you as their superior after that. If they cause trouble again, give them a short reminder of who's the leader here; since you prefer non-violent methods, do a sparkling lock, it might work.”

“Sparkling lock?”

“Put your hands on their napes and push at the equilibrium centers... Well, your twins most likely don't have those, since their frames are Autobot, but the gesture is ingrained into the coding. They should recognize it.”

“So... Where exactly do I push?” Optimus hated to admit his puzzlement, but it's not like he had a choice. He briefly thought back to his Academy days, wondering why they never learned such vital information as their enemies' anatomy.

“I can demonstrate it on you, if you wish.”

Optimus nearly choked.

“W-what?!”

Megatron was contemplating him, red optics twinkling with amusement, and Optimus quickly collected himself.

“You are *not* touching me.”

“Why not? I am in stasis cuffs; I can barely move, let alone harm anyone.” Megatron raised his hands in proof. These cuffs didn’t induce full stasis, but did slow down all motor functions; wide bands around the warlord’s wrists were connected by a cord that, in contrast to a standard model, allowed some range. The cord itself was attached to the wall above Megatron's head by a thick chain. Its length could be altered, pinning the Decepticon's hands to the wall in case anyone wanted to enter the cell, and blinking blue lights on the cuffs indicated that they had a shocking option.

“You can always electrocute me if I try something,” Megatron noticed the direction of Optimus's gaze and grinned, baring his sharp fangs. “Are you afraid of me?”

A rush of heat streamed up Optimus's spine, and he growled, mimicking Megatron's expression automatically, even though he had no fangs to present.

“I defeated you,” he said, punctuating every word. Megatron just continued grinning.

“Then you can try it on me,” he offered, tone insultingly mellow.

Another wave of liquid flame surged through Optimus's fuel lines, but this time not caused by anger. The idea of touching the Decepticon – Optimus's hand on the back of his neck, a gesture so personal it was nearly intimate – made him dizzy and queasy. His fingertips twitched, imaginary warmth of another's neck cables scorching them, and the young Prime subdued a shudder. He didn't want to touch the Decepticon! It was like touching a venomous organic creature, a spider; he'd prefer to never have to do it.

Somehow, the concept of Megatron touching him didn't seem quite as repulsive. At least this way Optimus wouldn't be the instigator.

The Autobot clenched his fists – a jerky, nervous movement betraying his condition.

“Fine,” he rasped. “Show me.”

While there was the common control panel at the door to the cell block, each separate cell had a little control panel of its own mounted on the opposite wall. Optimus activated Megatron's and switched the mode, turning the forcefield into bars. Then he took the remote controller and went back to the cell.

It seemed darker now, not illuminated by the blue hues of the forcefield. The warlord's optics glowed in the gloom like red embers, much brighter than before, when their color was softened by the lighting. As Optimus approached the bars, Megatron stood up.

The young Prime did say that he wasn't afraid, but during their conversations he got used to seeing Megatron in sitting position; he forgot just how huge the Decepticon was. They were separated only by the energy bars, and Optimus could feel it on a physical level – the sheer strength of the powerful warframe, the intensity of the EM field, the cruel ancient intelligence lurking under the dented and cracked grey helmet. Optimus was suddenly painfully aware of how small he was: his head only reached as high as Megatron's waist. Those stasis cuffs began to look terribly unconvincing...

Just how *did* he win in a fight with this creature?

“I suppose you'd prefer not to turn your back to me, so I suggest you turn your side.”

Optimus nearly jumped at the sound of Megatron's voice and looked up at his face. The warlord had a small smirk hiding in the corners of his mouth; Optimus straightened his back.

“Alright.” He raised the controller in a silent warning – one wrong motion, and the young Prime wouldn't hesitate to activate the electroshock – but did as he was told. Megatron lifted his own hands, so that Optimus could see them clearly, and slowly pushed one of them between the bars.

The large palm lay down on his nape, and Optimus had to grit his dental plates in order not to flinch. However, Megatron spoke the truth about barely being able to move, apparently: there wasn't any additional pressure or force put into the touch; the only thing Optimus felt was the weight of the Decepticon's hand, heavy and pleasantly warm.

“Here,” Megatron's low, rumbling voice startled Optimus out of the trance he never realized he went into. Fingers large enough to wrap around his throat and crush it curled, pressing two spots between the Prime's neck cables. “Hold them like this.”

Optimus blinked owlishly, overcoming the unexpected numbness; the sense of danger washed over him like a hot current, concentrating in his thrumming spark. Yet he couldn't will his body to move, as if the Decepticon's palm nailed him to the floor. The only thing he managed was to nod frantically, squeezing the electroshock controller.

Luckily, Megatron didn't test his patience: as soon as he saw Optimus nod, the hand retreated, and suddenly Optimus was able to move again. He stepped away from the cell, mouth dry and knees wobbly.

“Got it?” Megatron asked, and Optimus nodded again.

“Yes...” He busied himself with putting the controller back and switching the barrier from bars to forcefield, his nape still tingling. When he turned to the prisoner, his face was neutral once more. “Got it.”

“Great,” Megatron settled down on his bench – an image of lazy nonchalance. “Now, if you're done with your queries, I believe it is time for my payment. And remember, the amount of information you'll get next time will be in direct correlation to how detailed and honest your answers are.”

“Are you so sure there will be a next time?” If the Decepticon was aiming for irritating Optimus, he was positively succeeding.

Megatron flashed him a smirk.

“You never know.” The smug bastard.

“Fine.” Optimus crossed his arms. “Ask away.”

“What is your connection to Blackarachnia?”

Optimus coughed, all of his aggressive demeanor shattered to pieces. Of all topics, he never expected Megatron to pick this one. He didn't pry about Optimus's expulsion from the Academy last time, after all... But he couldn't possibly know these two questions were the same.

“I-I don't suppose I should be telling personal secrets of someone who had most likely perished.” Optimus shut his optics for a moment, the image of Blackarachnia's figure disappearing in explosion stuck before his inner sight like an accusation. You couldn't save her again, Optimus; instead, she died saving you.

“If she has indeed, as you say, perished, then she wouldn't care anymore,” Megatron's face remained stern. “After you told me your name, I remembered hearing it before,” he added a little

softer. “She mentioned it a couple of times when talking about why she left the Autobots. Always sounded terribly spiteful and bitter; such hate is born only of the strongest emotions.”

Optimus stared at his feet, spark throbbing against its casing. Silence hung in the room, urging him wordlessly, and he sighed. He had to answer, didn't he? This obligation somehow brought relief.

“Her name used to be Elita-1,” he began slowly. “We were friends in the Academy – she, Sentinel and I. Studied in the same group, hanged out together after classes.” Memories from Academy years were resurfacing as he spoke, and Optimus was surprised by how distant they appeared. Like all of that happened to another mech, in another life. Maybe it did; those were the memories of cadet Optimus, a promising young bot who'd seen no war, no dead friends, whose biggest failures were imperfect exam grades.

“We went to explore an organic planet one day – a planet that was strictly off-limits. But there were rumors of a crashed Decepticon ship with a cargo bay full of energon, and we believed it to be a great adventure. The rumors proved to be true, but the ship wasn't the only thing we found: there were those creatures... Like spiders of Earth, but much bigger. They attacked us, we tried to fight them off, but there were too many. And as we were escaping, Elita...” Despite many years that had passed since that day, Optimus had to reset his glitching vocalizer. “She could scan and copy other people's special abilities for short periods of time, and as she was using my grappling hook. Her time ran out, and she fell down into the hole full of spiders. Sentinel wanted to come back for her, but the ship was crumbling around us, all of the shooting distorting the ancient structure, so I grabbed Sentinel and forced him to leave, I thought Elita was dead, her life signal disappeared...” Optimus regretted that he didn't have his battlemask on to cover his quivering lips.

“But she wasn't,” Megatron's voice reverberated around him, cutting through the veil of past. Optimus concentrated on that voice – something that belonged to the present.

“She wasn't,” he admitted. “She used her ability on the spiders, and somehow it caused a reaction with their venom... Elita-1 turned into a technorganic.” He closed his optics, recalling the hideous monstrosity the femme's helmet concealed. “I don't know her further story. I don't know how she ended up with you 'cons or when she began calling herself Blackarachnia. As for me, I was expelled from the Academy. Sentinel never forgave me; he hates me for what I've done.”

“Whose idea was it to go to that planet?”

“Whose idea was it to go to this planet?” Ultra Magnus asked, blue optics icy cold.

Optimus froze – so strong the sense of déjà-vu was. He opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out. What should he say? What *could* he say?

“I was the senior cadet, sir. Whatever happened was my responsibility.”

“Whatever happened... was my responsibility.”

“Don't lie to a Decepticon, Optimus Prime.”

Optimus's head jerked up, and he met Megatron's skeptical optics.

“I... I didn't...” Something was twisting and hurling in his chest, and he dropped his gaze again.

“Sentinel's,” he whispered. “It was Sentinel's idea.”

“So he graduated from the Academy and made a career, while you were expelled.” Megatron

snorted. "I always said that Autobot educational system was slag."

Optimus wanted to be insulted... but for some reason he wasn't. That alone was rather disturbing.

"Why didn't you stand up for yourself? You could at least take Sentinel down with you."

"What would it change?" Optimus shrugged helplessly. "And he was right, in a way: it was I who left Elita behind."

"And saved him."

"He wanted to rescue her."

"But would've killed three cadets instead of one." Megatron's optics narrowed into two red slits.

"You demonstrated common sense and tactical thinking; he acted like a dumb sparkling."

"Why are you defending me?" Optimus frowned, genuinely confused and even more disturbed.

"You defeated me in battle."

"And so I must be worthy of that image and live up to your expectations?" he hissed sarcastically.

"Precisely."

"You are such a conceited jerk. Not everything is about you."

"But nothing is ever about *you*, am I correct?"

Optimus gawked at him, not quite following this particular turnabout in their conversation.

"Excuse me?"

"You didn't answer my question," Megatron's face suddenly became unbearably serious. "Why do you hold yourself solely responsible for Elita's loss?"

"Because..." Optimus bit his lip in exasperation. "I don't know! I don't know, alright? Because I simply do!" He averted his optics, horrified by his ill-timed outburst but unable to stop it. "I know Sentinel feels guilty too," he added quietly. "I know he is suffering still. He blames himself, just as I blame myself. He simply... expresses it differently."

Fortunately, Megatron dropped this topic, and they spent some time in silence.

"Was she Sentinel's girlfriend?" the Decepticon inquired at last, making Optimus stare at him, stunned.

"How did you know?"

"A guess. You look like the quintessential third wheel."

Optimus grimaced.

"Go frag yourself, Megatron. I think we're done for today."

"As you wish." Megatron leaned against the wall – the only more or less relaxed pose that was available to him – and made a dismissive gesture. "If you happen to be passing through my city, make sure to drop by."

This phrase made Optimus stop in his tracks.

“This is not *your* city.”

“On the contrary, little Autobot,” red optics gleamed dangerously, “Kaon was and will always be my city, just as Trypticon is my fortress. If you don’t believe me – take a walk around. They are simply waiting for me, and one day I *will* reclaim them. Have a safe journey, Autobot.”

He closed his optics, but as Optimus was walking out of the cell block, and even as he said goodbye to Sureshock and the warden, he still felt that fiery red gaze on his back armor, scalding and piercing it straight to the core.

Megatron’s recommendations worked perfectly once again. Outflying the twins was impossible for Optimus, but when it came to combat, be it in the air or on the ground, even the combined forces of them both weren’t enough to take the young Prime down. The first spar left Jetfire and Jetstorm gaping at him from below, where they lay sprawled on the floor, and after the third match surprise gave place to awe and... respect. When Optimus first met the Jettwins, they associated respect with rank, but lately they became insubordinate, forgetting about ranks completely and challenging everyone and everything. Now, however, Optimus returned what he had lost – and more. The twins tended to fall behind him when they flew, as if they chose him to be their trine leader. They also actually listened to him when he reprimanded them, which made keeping their tempers in check much easier.

Ratchet was casting suspicious glances at him, obviously having some guesses about the origins of Optimus’s more than useful information, but mentioned nothing. Optimus was thankful for that: every time he pictured himself explaining his deal with Megatron, his throat tightened, feeling dry and hot, as his audial and visual sensors filled with static. The phantom weight of a broad hand descended on his neck, and Optimus couldn’t utter a word. His logical reason insisted that Ratchet wouldn’t judge him, that Ratchet would understand, and yet his spark was still trembling in dread. Traitor; failure; ungrateful glitch; these words were haunting him, drilling into his mind. Megatron started a civil war that almost destroyed their homeworld, Megatron killed thousands of innocents, Megatron was trying to harm Optimus’s friends... Prowl sacrificed his life to stop him.

And Optimus repaid Prowl by making secret bargains with the warlord!

However, when another fit of self-doubt passed, he only grew more confident in his course of action. Optimus might have gone against his conscience a bit, but he did it to help others. If he had to choose between accepting Megatron’s terms and seeing the Jettwins lose themselves to the alien coding they never asked for, he was ready to do what was needed. He was sure that, were Prowl alive, he’d do the same thing.

Tough choices were what responsibility was all about. Earth taught him that, and Optimus learned his lesson well.

Chapter End Notes

Since some of you wondered: Mini-Cons are canon for TFA universe, them running Trypticon prison is a fact stated in the Allspark Almanac.

Part I, Chapter 4

“The Decepticon uprisings at the rim of the Galaxy are escalating again,” Alpha Trion looked over the Council Hall from his high seat. “They know we have their leader and his brass; there is a very high possibility of another jailbreak attempt.”

Sentinel made an inexplicable sound; the last attempted jailbreak was based on his desire to rub his victory into Megatron's face. But Sentinel had always been fond of the idea that offense was the best defense, so he rebooted his vocalizer and declared:

“Then we should just execute the bastard and be done with it!”

“We cannot 'execute the bastard', Sentinel Magnus,” Alpha Trion cast a sharp glance at him. “Megatron is the head of a state officially recognized by the Galactic Council.”

“Our war with the Decepticons is our private business.” Sentinel scowled, not even trying to hide his disgust. “We don't have to explain ourselves to a bunch of nosy aliens!”

“That is incorrect.” Perceptor's artificially modulated voice resonated around the chamber. “The Decepticon Empire is a sovereign state, as confirmed by the Tyrest Accord that ended the Great War. The Vestial Imperium has trade relations with them, and other nations use them as mercenaries to deal with piracy in the region. Upsetting the Decepticons will most likely make them resort to piracy themselves. If we execute their leader without trial, they will have a right to apply to the Galactic Council; considering our current status of being at war with the Decepticons, the Galactic Council allying with them will put us at a severe disadvantage. I can provide a list of territorial disputes we have with our neighbor states that...”

“Alright, alright, enough!” Sentinel sighed, rubbing his nasal ridge. “Fine; let's have a trial then. With all that Megatron had done, he'll be condemned in the first five klicks.”

“We should send for the envoys from the Galactic Council, then,” Alpha Trion gave a sign to his secretary, who began typing. “According to interplanetary laws, neutral overseers must be present when a head of state is prosecuted by another state.”

“Oh for spark's sake...” Optimus couldn't help but smile at Sentinel fighting off the desire to facepalm. “Whatever! Call for the envoys, ambassadors, diplomats and all other paper pushers, if that's what you need. Just spare me the details!”

Alpha Trion looked pretty annoyed by the time Sentinel finished his outburst, but kept his opinion to himself. They all knew that their Magnus had no respect for those who didn't have a military rank to support them.

“...And so we're going to have a huge public trial, although nobody knows when.” Optimus finished retelling the events of the last Council session to Ratchet, who snorted.

“Yeah, with all due procedures Megatron can happily rest for another ten stellar cycles. Politics,” he scoffed and returned to cleaning his tools. “Hate to say that, but sometimes I kinda agree with our Acting Magnus. He might be a pompous piece of slag, but at least he doesn't sit around blabbering when the ground is about to be cut from under his feet.”

“You think our situation is that bad?”

"I think that the Decepticons cannot be trusted, ever." Ratchet rubbed the scar on his arm. "And even imprisoned and under constant surveillance, Megatron is extremely dangerous."

Optimus squirmed in his seat.

"So," Ratchet didn't give the slightest hint that he noticed anything, "I'm going to the Elite Guard hospital tomorrow; gonna pick Arcee up. Wanna go with me?"

"She's being released? Of course, I'd love to go. If it's okay with you – I mean, you two have a lot to talk about, so if I..."

"Calm down, kid," Ratchet chuckled softly. "I wouldn't be inviting you if we didn't want to see you."

"Okay then," Optimus returned his smile. "I'll meet you at the hospital."

"You don't want to drive with me?"

"No, it's just..." his smile turned sorrowful. "I have someone else I wanted to visit there."

The intensive therapy ward was heavily guarded, but the soldiers saluted to Optimus and let him in without question, despite the rambling objections of a fussy medic. Optimus apologized to him and passed through the doors, closing them and shutting off all the noise. Now the only sound to distort the silence was the beeping of the life support systems.

Ultra Magnus's broken body was lying limp on the medical slab, gaping wound in his side covered by a metal patch hiding artificial fuel lines and pumps that kept the old bot alive. His optics were offline, austere wrinkles still adorning the corners of his mouth, as if Ultra Magnus was ready to scold some obnoxious cadets again. This expression was so familiar, so natural, that it made the Autobot Commander's weakened and vulnerable state even more torturous to see. The Magnus Hammer was standing in the corner, leaned on the wall, a loyal servant waiting for its master.

"Hello... sir," Optimus said quietly, his whisper interlocking with the dismal melody of the life support's beeps.

Ultra Magnus didn't move; but it was foolish to expect a miracle.

"The war hasn't started yet, but we are doing everything to avoid it." Optimus sat down on the chair in the corner, clasping his hands. "We're all trying our best, but Sentinel is volatile and rash, and the Council can't find harmony with him. He means well, though, I know it; you didn't make him your second-in-command for nothing. You always taught us responsibility, so that we'd be ready to act on our own, but we could really use you right now, sir..." Something cracked inside Optimus, and he hid his face in palms. "I miss you," he murmured, words muffled. He didn't know what came over him; it's not that he often saw Ultra Magnus, and he fell out of the Autobot Commander's favor after the incident with Elita, but simply knowing that the old bot was somewhere there warmed Optimus's spark. Ultra Magnus was a fundamental part of the world, like a mountain rising on the horizon, a promise of stability, that everything will be okay in the end. If things went wrong, Ultra Magnus would appear to make them right and offer his wisdom. Yet here he was lying broken and helpless, stripped of his power by Shockwave the traitor.

Optimus's cheeks heated with shame. It was unfair; even now he was mourning Ultra Magnus as a political figure, a symbol rather than a person. But Optimus missed him as a person too. It's just that so few had an opportunity to know Ultra Magnus in this regard... He had always kept distance;

but this was one of the burdens of leadership, Optimus supposed. Loneliness at the top. He learned some of it during his stay on Earth, even though he only had four bots under his command, and all of them were his friends.

He briefly wondered about Megatron – another leader of a faction who was confined and vulnerable right now. Did he have the same problem? Decepticons were selfish loners by nature, but still – was that why Megatron was talking to him? Was it – if at least partially – a simple longing for a company?

What would Ultra Magnus say about Optimus's relations with the warlord?

“I hope you would forgive me, sir,” Optimus murmured. “I don't know if I chose the right way... but this is the only way I could find.”

But of course, Ultra Magnus didn't respond.

When Optimus entered the hospital's main hall, Ratchet was already there.

“Hey, kid,” he smiled, waving to him, and the Prime barely restrained a giggle. Seeing usually gruff and irritable Ratchet so elated, almost bursting with joy, was strange – but nice. Ratchet actually looked younger! Bumblebee would probably make a ton of jokes if he were here, and it was entirely possible that Ratchet wouldn't even care.

Arcee's ward wasn't far away, and in a couple of clicks they were met with the sight of the pink femme collecting her few personal belongings (all of them brand new).

“Ratchet!” She beamed, and the old medic's EM field fluttered. “And Optimus Prime.” She nodded politely to him. They knew each other only briefly, not having enough time neither during their last push against Megatron, nor later. But Arcee had obviously been watching the news.

“I am so glad to finally leave these walls,” Arcee hid her small bag in the subspace. “My doctors keep telling me that my first goal should be integrating into the modern life after all the stellar cycles I missed, but it's kind of hard when the only place you see is a hospital ward. Oh, and guess what? They say I'm fit for duty!”

Ratchet's smile lost its shine at these words.

“Isn't that a bit early?” he asked quietly. “You've just woken up.”

“I lost consciousness in a world ravaged by war, and now I wake up in peacetime,” Arcee's gaze wandered off to the window. “I... Want to remind myself what peace is like. And I want to protect it. But from what I figured, there are no immediate battles planned, so there is time to catch up, right?”

“Right... Don't worry, Arcee,” Ratchet offered her an arm, hiding his emotions again. “You will have as much time to catch up as you need.” He coughed, resetting his vocalizer. “I have the keys from a hab suite the High Command commissioned for you, and Omega can't wait to meet you.”

“I'd love to see Omega first,” Arcee took his arm. “Apparently, I have some money on my account thanks to the rehabilitation program, so we can buy some fancy energon and celebrate. You are invited too, Optimus Prime,” she added, noticing his uncertainty. “It's a pity the rest of your team are not here; I'm eternally grateful to you for rescuing me from the Decepticons' clutches.”

Optimus lowered his optics.

“You're, um, welcome.”

And celebrate they did – on a ramp high in the air, in order to be at the same level with Omega Supreme's face. Ratchet and Arcee talked about their pre-war lives, and to Optimus it was a revelation: he always supposed those two were old friends, but now he realized that in fact they basically met each other about a day before Arcee's memories were wiped out. Now they were getting to know each other for real, and Arcee was getting to know Omega. Despite the company being pleasant, Optimus soon felt a little forlorn. He chuckled to himself softly; it appeared that he *was* a quintessential third wheel, wasn't he? Two small cubes of high grade energon were sloshing in his tanks, making him a bit tipsy, and Optimus decided that it was time to go home. He said his goodbyes to the other three, who asked him to stay but didn't insist, and left.

It was way past curfew; the streets were empty, since Sentinel's security measures demanded that loyal Autobots stayed at home at night. Optimus was stopped by a patrol squad, but they apologized and let him go as soon as they saw who he was (but not before asking for autographs). Some rational part of the Prime's processor told him that he'd probably be very ashamed of himself in the morning, but for now his CPU was delightfully numb and sluggish.

His small hab suite met him with emptiness and outdated paraphernalia. It was furnished what seemed like a lifetime ago, when Optimus was still a cadet in the Academy; after he was expelled he departed for service with his maintenance team almost immediately, and since then he'd gotten used to living in a small cabin on Omega or in his spacious, but very un-Cybertronian room at their Earth base. He had his career crumbled and restored, he fought Decepticons and saved two planets from Megatron's conquest, and now this hab suite didn't feel like home anymore. History books and movies on the shelves, trophies from the Academy, Elite Guard posters on the walls – all of this belonged to a different bot: a wide-eyed cadet, practically a sparkling.

He was offered a better hab suite as a reward for his excellent service, but refused; that luxurious apartment was even less welcoming.

Optimus locked the door behind him and fell on his berth with a deep sigh. His body was tingling, high grade sending warmth through his fuel lines; he drank just enough to get the effects without being sick, and somehow it helped to forget how out of place he was in this old room. How out of place he was in general.

“A third wheel.” Optimus chuckled, these words bringing out amusement rather than bitterness. He was used to this. A hero must be alone, after all, mustn't he? But Optimus wasn't going to complain, he was fine with the path he chose for himself.

Although... Who said he can't have a little bit of fun? This room brought back old memories; how many times did Optimus immerse in the world of fantasy on this very berth, bringing himself to overload repeatedly? Optimus rolled onto his back, blissful smile playing on his lips. Really, why not relive it? He had a free evening, he was alone and secure, and he had all the time to himself; no imminent crisis he ought to solve, no ridiculous shenanigans of his friends to interrupt him...

And jokes aside, perhaps he needed that. He hadn't taken care of himself since... Huh. Since his Academy days, apparently. Optimus wasn't comfortable with jerking off when other bots were resting right behind the wall and could call for him every klik.

Suddenly filled with anticipation, Optimus squirmed, making himself comfortable, and allowed his hands to wander across his chest, threading the seams and delving under the windshields lightly, recalling all the familiar routes and sensitive spots. It felt... It felt very good. He really should've

done this sooner. Relaxed a bit and let himself unwind.

Optimus mewled quietly when his right hand ventured lower and rubbed his interface panel, which was still firmly locked. Years ago Optimus would have opened it right away and began rubbing his sealed port and connector, hurrying to reach the peak. Now, however, Optimus wasn't going to rush it; he wanted to savor his time and go slow.

He kept the interface panel closed, deliberately denying himself pleasure, and moaned from this realization alone. Tease, he was such a tease... Wait.

Optimus opened the optics he unconsciously shut, stricken by a sudden idea. How could he forget his “private time program”? Giggling elatedly, he drew out archived data from his Academy years, opening one particular file.

Long ago he constructed it for himself – a dream bot to imagine during self-service. A perfect incarnation of all Optimus's fantasies, a lover that belonged only to him and did what Optimus wanted him to do. A click – and the image was upon him: the dream's strong hands caressing him instead of Optimus's own shaky palms, EM field wrapping him in lust, confident smirk on a face that Optimus couldn't quite make out.

This was one thing his projection lacked: Optimus never managed to create a face for this mech. Pretty visages of models from magazines seemed too generic, and using a person he knew was weird. So the mech remained faceless, but Optimus could read his expressions even with the indistinct features. After all, this was just a jerk-off fantasy; it worked just fine like this.

Optimus's engine began purring as his phantom lover touched him all over, gentle or firm whenever it was wanted. The Prime's charge was rising steadily; he could almost sense the mass of the larger mech above him, and Optimus's legs parted on their own, interface panel uncomfortably tight and overheating. He moaned, reaching for his partner, who lowered his head to nuzzle Optimus's neck – and spoke in an intimate, commanding tone:

“Open for me.”

Optimus's optics flashed, and he arched on the berth, hands paralyzed as white-hot terror gripped his spark. How could he forget about this?

He constructed this dream bot to be perfect: Optimus gave him Ultra Magnus's stature, Sentinel's shapely legs, Elita's agile and clever hands...

He also gave him Megatron's voice.

It wasn't that strange, to be frank; they listened to some extracts from Megatron's speeches during history lessons in the Academy, and it was widely joked that the Decepticon lord had swayed most of his followers to his side by entrancing them with his voice. But really, the mech could make *any* phrase sound like he was seducing someone!

Back then Megatron was nothing more but a character in a textbook, a legendary monster. However, latest events made him terribly *real*, and Optimus felt with frightening tangibility the warmth of a heavy hand on his neck – and another hand stroking his abdomen, large, possessive, persistent... And where the phantom's featureless faceplate once was Optimus saw slanted red optics and sharp fangs glistening between parted lips. But the worst thing of all was the rush of sheer *excitement* that coursed through his frame like a merciless tide.

With a choked incoherent scream the Prime jumped on his berth, put his hands away from his

plating, as if burning them, and switched the program off. It took several seconds for him to form any structured thoughts and to calm down his activated battle protocols. No; he was in his room, alone, he was safe; there was no immediate danger and no need to prepare for a fight.

Optimus cursed under his breath, falling back on his berth. Stupid, stupid little cadet! This only highlighted just how much had changed; now he wouldn't even consider anything related to the Decepticons as some carefree fun. They were enemies hell-bent on destroying everything the Autobots stood for; they were not to be treated lightly.

Optimus shifted and heard the obscene squelch of cooling lubricants trapped behind his interface panel. He scowled. Disgusting; he was disgusting.

“Open for me, *Optimus Prime*,” Megatron's voice whispered into his audial, and Optimus shuddered. His name was practically *defiled* by the imaginary Decepticon's sultry tone.

Furious and troubled and ashamed, Optimus hurried for the washracks.

About a week later another morning arrived with devastating news.

“The Decepticons attacked a colony at the border of our space, and Omega Supreme is being deployed,” Ratchet told Optimus, face contorted into a sour grimace.

“Deployed? You mean, you and Omega are leaving?”

“Omega, me – and Arcee.” Ratchet literally spat these words.

“But she's just out of hospital!”

“Yeah, that's what I've been trying to tell our precious Acting Magnus, but can you guess where he told me to shove it? ‘We must hit the Decepticons with all we've got,’” he quoted mockingly.

“‘Our greatest weapon of victory should scare them just right.’ Arcee is looking forward to it,” he added quietly. “She wants to catch up as fast as possible. But war is the last thing I wanted her to catch up with...”

“I will try to talk to Sentinel,” Optimus put his hand on Ratchet's shoulder. “But why wasn't I informed? Isn't it logical to send me into battle as well?”

Sentinel answered this question during their meeting later that day.

“While we must demonstrate to the Decepticons our full power, we mustn't leave Cybertron unprotected,” Sentinel paused, obviously remembering how Elite Guard's actions almost allowed Megatron to conquer Cybertron from within. “You will be more needed here. The hero who captured the Decepticon leader should make sure Megatron remains captured until we finish with that ridiculous court.”

Sentinel didn't elaborate further, but judging by the tone in which he pronounced the word ‘hero’, he also wanted to make sure that there would be no new heroics from Optimus. The Acting Magnus didn't like competition.

And so Optimus said goodbye to his friends and watched Omega Supreme rise to the sky, the gathered crowd cheering and waving to him. The Prime knew he was being selfish, knew he should be more concerned about the war effort and Autobot success, but at that moment the only emotion filling him was melancholic yearning. His teammates that had become his friends were

dispersed, all having extremely important tasks in different places, like someone was deliberately stripping Optimus of his connections. The first urge was to suspect Sentinel... Yet Optimus doubted that. There was much bad blood between them, but Sentinel (with all due respect) was too straightforward to employ such a scheme.

Consciously, that is.

Optimus shook his head, trying to chase these thoughts away. He was being paranoid. And he could still call his friends, right?

Except that communication with Earth was limited, and Bulkhead... wasn't that much of a talker. It was his physical presence that emanated affection and gentleness, while his words were scarce and clumsy. Those few calls that Optimus made ended shortly. In addition, he simply couldn't shake off the awareness that all communications were monitored; Optimus wasn't going to discuss anything incriminating, but he had no desire to let some agent listen to his personal conversations and then sell their scripts to paparazzi to be twisted and warped.

But there was still one vent-hole for him to use. Grabbing his jetpack, Optimus headed for the Elite Guard training grounds.

Optimus never reached his destination. What distracted him were loud voices coming from the edge of the square where the crowd was thinner.

"Hey, what's your problem?" That was Jetstorm speaking.

"Not that we do bad things to you." Jetfire joined in, and Optimus didn't like his intonation.

"You might as well try it!" A shrill voice replied, its owner seemingly riled up and on the verge on hysteria. "How can Elite Guard even allow you to walk around unsupervised?!"

Optimus immediately made his way through the crowd to the place where the Autobots were forming a circle around the arguing parties. There they were: Jetfire and Jetstorm opposing two civilians, a huge worker-class mech and a slender femme.

"How can they even allow you to *bear* their symbol?!" the mech growled, pointing at the Elite Guard emblem on Jetstorm's hip. "Decepticon slag!"

"You hear that, brother?" Optimus shuddered, so unfamiliar and dark Jetfire's voice sounded.

"I think they insult us, brother."

"Maybe we teach them to respect Autobot soldiers."

"Should do, brother."

"Autobots don't fly!" the femme shouted, and this was the last drop.

The twins began moving, slowly approaching the civilians as the crowd watched, low grumble starting to boil in its deep, but before the fight could break loose Optimus ran into the circle and grabbed the twins' necks in a lock he had already memorized to the point of reflex.

"Stop!" he yelled, trying to sound as commanding as possible, and then looked at the confused and begrudged civilians in front of him. "You, leave immediately."

“But we want justice...” the mech began – and was promptly silenced by Optimus’s glare and firm: “Now.”

Apparently, his authority was still worth something; the two civilians obeyed, muttering curses, and the crowd dissolved. Optimus glanced at the twins, who didn’t struggle in his hold but appeared extremely unapologetic.

“As for you, we need to have a chat.”

“They said bad things about us!”

“Yeah! Should we stay calm?! Nobody talk scrap about my brother!”

“And about my brother!”

“But did you just have to answer them?” Optimus sighed, rubbing his nasal ridge. They were sitting in the twins’ room again, and all of this was becoming a tiresome routine.

Jetfire and Jetstorm exchanged confused looks.

“Well, yeah!”

“When a bot hurt our friend, we make the bot pay.”

“Somebody say scrap about Sentinel Magnus – we protect Sentinel Magnus.”

“Somebody say scrap about you – we protect you too.”

“Please don’t do this,” Optimus lifted his hands, flattered but also rather bothered. “Look, they were civilians; not even soldiers. They are those people we swore to defend when we joined the military. And you exert your power to start fights with them?”

“Did not swear to defend ungrateful glitches,” Jetfire crossed his arms stubbornly.

“Why defend bots who hate us?”

“And why they hate us? We did no wrong!”

This question stabbed him in the spark, and Optimus averted his optics. His last conversation with Ratchet resurfaced in his mind, medic’s concerns finally finding their way into words.

“I see what you’ve been doing with the Jettwins, kid, and I can’t deny the results. Even Jazz has been making comments about your superb pedagogic skills. I don’t want to make any assumptions about the source of your ideas, it’s not really my business,” Ratchet’s mouth twitched, “but I want to warn you: please make sure that you are not raising two Decepticons in our midst.”

Optimus smiled at him back then and grasped the old mech’s arm.

“I am fully aware of the danger, Ratchet,” he said. “But I don’t aim to raise Decepticons. I’m raising flying Autobots.”

It was a tricky task, Optimus realized, one that no bot had to deal with before. But as strange and risky as it was, Optimus wasn’t going to give up. He left behind one friend long ago – a terrible, terrible mistake that will never stop haunting him – and he wasn’t going to leave anybody behind

ever again.

And he will do everything in his might for the twins to never fall into the smelting pit of self-revulsion that Blackarachnia lived in.

“Listen,” Optimus made a short pause to collect his thoughts. “I know what those two said was unfair to you and totally uncalled for. But you have abilities they don’t possess; you are stronger than them, and you defy the laws of nature they grew up with. People are often afraid of things that are powerful and unfamiliar, so there is no wonder they are afraid of you. However, it doesn’t mean that you should go around beating up fellow Autobots. Do you know what the difference between Autobots and Decepticons is?”

“Um... They bigger?” Jetfire guessed. “They have red optics?”

“They fly?”

Optimus almost winced at Jetstorm’s suggestion, but kept his calm.

“No. Well, that too, but the real difference is that Decepticons abuse their strength according to their own whims. We Autobots protect life, we pride ourselves in valuing things like friendship, duty, honor. They care only about themselves. Now tell me, are you Autobots or Decepticons?”

“Autobots!” the twins exclaimed in unison. “Autobots!”

“Then you should never use your power for your own pleasure. There will be those who treat you unfairly, and there will be those frightened of you; but this is an opportunity for you to show your true colors. Trust me, with time people will get used to you, and if they see that you are not a threat to them, they will stop saying those things about you. Besides, you are more than just Autobots,” Optimus walked to the twins and gripped their shoulders. “You are Elite Guard soldiers – the pride of the Autobot race, the best of the best! You have another duty: setting an example. So let the entire Cybertron see what superb defenders it has in you!”

The Jettwins jumped to their feet, almost making Optimus fall on his aft gracelessly, and saluted.

“Sir, yes sir!”

And Optimus couldn’t help but smile, watching their gleeful faces. No, Ratchet’s warnings weren’t going to come to life; no matter what coding infected their processors, at spark Jetstorm and Jetfire were true Autobots.

Part I, Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Here is that minor character death I warned about in the tags.

Ultra Magnus died in the hospital in the night.

His spark had been slowly waning for a long time, and finally it burned out completely. The news made the headlines that morning, and when Optimus woke up, the entirety of Cybertron was overwhelmed with shock. Despite Ultra Magnus being on life support for a while, him actually dying seemed impossible. He was like a universal constant, always there embodying the Autobot cause, and for Optimus the idea of a world without Ultra Magnus was too hard to grasp.

Preparations for grand state funeral and the funeral itself went by in a blur. Optimus was making arrangements, spilling platitudes in response to the reporters' questions about his experience of working under Ultra Magnus, and didn't even have time to sit down and try to wrap his head around what happened. He was glad that Sentinel made the eulogy, because he doubted he could say anything coherent. It was a bit bizarre, to be frank: standing there behind Sentinel's shoulder, looking at Ultra Magnus's grey and colorless frame laid before the silent crowd and hundreds of cameras. It didn't quite feel like Ultra Magnus – more like a strange puppet of him. But after the coffin was locked and carried to the tomb under Fortress Maximus where the Autobot leaders of old were buried, the numbness began to loosen its grip on Optimus. Only now did he begin to sense that something big had transpired; something had changed forever.

Realization struck when the next day he saw Sentinel receive the Magnus Hammer from Alpha Trion's hands. The old mech didn't look particularly thrilled about this transgression, while Sentinel appeared positively smug despite his "official" solemn expression, but Optimus couldn't really care about all of that right now. His spark constricted, optics burning with the sudden assault of emotions; wrong, this was so wrong! Yes, he borrowed the Hammer before, but it was a temporary measure, and it should be laid in peace in its master's hand, it wasn't Magnus Hammer for nothing, it belonged to the rightful commander of Autobot forces...

It belonged to Sentinel Magnus now.

It took all of Optimus's willpower to wait till the end of the ceremony, and then he didn't even stay to congratulate his friend; instead, he fled. But everywhere he went reporters followed him, eager to get their hands on an exclusive interview with the hero of Cybertron, and so Optimus retreated to the formidable mass of Fortress Maximus.

His wandering led him to the hall where the remains of the Allspark were kept in the round casing that Optimus forged for it – but the sight of Cybertron's blessed life-giving artifact didn't soothe Optimus now. All he remembered as he looked at the shining relic were his hands clutching the Magnus Hammer as he worked on it, and the ghostly form of Prowl who sacrificed his life to make the Allspark whole again. It was lying there like a silent accusation, a reminder of all Optimus's mistakes, of all his dear people he failed to save. His first instinct was to turn and run again, but where could he run so that his guilt wouldn't catch him?

When he got home late at night, he found three unanswered calls on his videophone: from Omega

Supreme, from Earth and from a distant Autobot colony. Despite everything, Optimus's lips curved slightly; he might've made a lot of mistakes in his life, but at least he still had friends.

"Still" being the right word, his inner voice whispered venomously. People close to Optimus had an uncomfortable habit of dying lately.

Talking to Ratchet, Bulkhead, Bumblebee and Sari helped a little – but not as much as Optimus would wish. When he woke up, he felt bloated, weary – like some inscrutable thick substance filled his fuel lines instead of energon, bending him down, making his moves sluggish. His head was empty, uncomfortably so; a reasonable part of Optimus's mind told him that it must be connected to grief, but he didn't actually *feel* grief – he simply felt... nothing.

His friends expressed their condolences yesterday and tried to console him to the extent of their abilities (some being less tactful than the others), but somehow it wasn't enough, and this only added on to Optimus's guilt: how could he not be satisfied with what he'd been given? What else did he want, a personal nurse to hug him and bring him a glass of oil in berth?

Maybe he just needed to talk to someone who knew Ultra Magnus as well as him. Who saw the old mech as a person, not some icon from newspapers. Who mourned him just as much.

Maybe he needed to talk to Sentinel.

Seeking out the no-more-Acting-Magnus was already a challenge. He seemed to be terribly busy with state affairs, but when Optimus finally found him Sentinel was trying on a headpiece that was supposed to indicate his new status.

"Sentinel?" the Prime called a bit unsurely.

"Oh, hey, Optimus, old pal!" As always with Sentinel's talks to him, it was hard to discern where the sarcasm ended and genuine friendliness started. "Came to congratulate me at last, huh?" He winked to Optimus's reflection in the mirror.

The Prime shuffled his foot, this action suddenly seeming very engrossing.

"Yeah... Congratulations."

"I don't hear joy in your words." Sentinel turned to him at last, mockery leaving his voice. "What is it, Optimus?"

"I wanted to ask... Well..." Why was it always so hard to be sincere with Sentinel? "It's about Ultra Magnus."

"Oh." There was something in this sound that made Optimus lift his head.

Sentinel was looking to the side, blue optics dim and glazed.

"Listen... Optimus," he began slowly. "We are at war. The Decepticons are attacking our borders, and they won't stop until they destroy us and everything that has the Autobot symbol on it. Ultra Magnus was a great bot – for an old outdated model – but we cannot dwell on the past. We must think about the future if we want to *have* a future. So you'd better go and inspire people with your deeds or practice your flying or do whatever is your duty, and let me do what is mine." He met Optimus's gaze, and his lips tightened in a harsh line. "This is an order from your Magnus."

Optimus had an almost unconscious urge to just walk over to his friend and embrace him despite all protests, and he already raised his hand... but something stopped him. Perhaps it was the cold rejection in Sentinel's optics, perhaps it was something else.

Instead he simply bowed and obeyed his Magnus.

Optimus didn't quite see where he was going after he left Sentinel's chambers. His CPU was in disarray, all sounds mixing into one distant cacophony that didn't really matter, not as much as the hollow void sucking his spark in. At some moment he found himself at the training grounds again, his jetpack unfolded and ready for use – and suddenly a wild thought crossed his mind, as crazy as it was bright.

There was one more person who knew Ultra Magnus for many, many solar cycles. One that was (albeit indirectly) responsible for the Autobot Commander's death.

Rage boiled in his chest, EM field flaring up like thunderstorm, and before his common sense could interfere and offer the full list of reasons why this was a horrible idea, the Prime jumped into the air, activated the jetpack and set the course to Kaon.

He had never flown so fast. It was as if he was trying to escape from Iacon's officiality, from the reporters and ceremonial speeches and never-ending politics, but most of all – from the calls of logic that chased him like a flock of fighter drones. There was a faint awareness in his core that if he hesitated, if he slowed down for a minute, those thoughts would catch up with him and make him change his mind. He couldn't allow it right now; he couldn't go back to his post and act normally. He needed to vent his emotions *somehow*.

He sped past the warden, mumbling greetings, and then hurried along with Sureshock, whose tiny legs could barely catch up with Optimus's strides. And only when he was left alone in the familiar passageway with the blue light of the forcefield gleaming ahead did he pause.

This was it. He really came here. What for? What did you think about, foolish little cadet? What are you going to do? Will you once again venture into the depths of a Decepticon ship, expecting to find treasure but walking straight into a spider lair?

But there was something in his spark right now that was stronger than caution, some resolve that made Optimus clench his fists and head forward.

"Hello, Optimus Prime." Megatron greeted him like at an old acquaintance. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Can't say the same about you," Optimus spat automatically, even though he was going to keep cool at least at first. Perhaps Megatron was just that infuriating.

"And yet you come all the way from Iacon to meet me. What was it this time?" The Decepticon lord tilted his head a little, apparently fully intent on making small talk, but Optimus was having none of that. He didn't "come all the way from Iacon" to play Megatron's games.

"Ultra Magnus is dead," he hissed like a swish of a whip.

But Megatron's reaction was nothing like he predicted.

“Really?” The warlord seemed genuinely taken aback, his optics widening – and then growing darker. “I... am sorry to hear this.”

It was Optimus’s turn to be shocked.

“Excuse me, you are sorry? *You* are sorry for *Ultra Magnus’s* death? You, the mech who fought him for millions of stellar cycles?”

Megatron cast a sharp glance at him.

“Ultra Magnus was an enemy, yes, but he was a worthy enemy. He won the war for his race, and this is an accomplishment that deserves respect, no matter what side you are on. Fighting him was an honor, and, although I’m glad to learn that the Autobot Commonwealth is weakened by the loss of its leader and Shockwave will be commended for offlining him, I *am* sorry that such a great soldier as Ultra Magnus is gone.”

Optimus stood in silence, watching the Decepticon finish his speech and proceed to stare at the wall poignantly. All of the Prime’s wrath dissipated somewhere, leaving an exhausted weariness behind, like the sea that had finally let a shipwrecked sailor out of its clutches.

“Tell me about Ultra Magnus,” he said, surprising himself.

Megatron, apparently, shared his reaction.

“Pardon me, what?”

“You knew him for much longer than I did,” and with every word Optimus felt more convinced that yes, this was exactly what he wanted. “For me he was a mentor and commander. Tell me what kind of enemy he was.”

Megatron was contemplating him strangely.

“You do realize it will cost you another question?”

Optimus grimaced and waved his hand, pressure inside his chest becoming unbearable.

“Yes, sure, whatever. Just... Tell me something about Ultra Magnus.”

Megatron observed him for another infinite klik, as if doubting his sanity, but then inclined his head.

“Fine. I’ll tell you a story. One that, according to my information, isn’t known to most Autobots, since old Ultra made sure it was erased from all public records.”

“What, is it about him acting stupid?” Optimus’s expression hardened; he was a fool to hope for anything nice coming from Megatron.

“No,” the Decepticon leader flashed an unusually mischievous grin, “it’s about him acting *reckless*.”

Optimus settled down on the floor, briefly reminding himself that next time he should *definitely* bring a chair, and prepared to listen.

“And so, imagine that: Ultra Magnus is driving through the no man’s land between the borders,

stolen deflector shield prototype in his trailer and half of the Decepticon army hot on his heels, when he has to hit the brakes because there is a moat filled with molten lava in front of him! He transforms to his root mode, looks around and realizes that he's trapped. Since he decided to show off and go alone, the Autobot reinforcements simply can't reach there in time. I offer him to surrender the prototype, he refuses, I order to open fire... And then he activates the deflector shield."

"Now let me tell you, that thing was developed for space battles, so its range was suitable for spaceships, not single bots – meaning that the shield would be positioned rather far from the place where the device was installed. And so, when the forcefield appeared, it practically stormed through the area, hammering into my troops and pushing us far, far back. But the best thing was that the backlash from it was so powerful that it sent Ultra Magnus flying through the air over the moat like a pebble from a slingshot! Unfortunately for him, he let go of the prototype, so it fell right into the lava, but when Ultra Magnus rose to his feet, he was already in safety."

"This mission wasn't a complete failure for the Autobots, since Ultra did manage to rob us of our invention and delete all the files regarding it from our databases, but it wasn't a success either, since he lost the prototype itself. After that Ultra never went to do heroics alone," Megatron chuckled, obviously immersed in memories.

Optimus couldn't help but snort.

"No wonder he made sure as few people knew about that adventure as possible," he murmured, smiling. It was indeed a bit weird to imagine wise and imposing Ultra Magnus as a young and ambitious leader, but everybody was young once. Even Megatron.

This thought popped the balloon of serenity that formed around Optimus during the story; he remembered just where he was and *whom* he was speaking with.

Right. Not the moment to lose vigilance.

Optimus jumped to his feet promptly, brushing the non-existent dust off his plating.

"Yeah," he coughed, not quite able to collect himself right away. "Well... It's your turn to ask."

"I'll pass."

"Huh? Why?" Optimus gaped at the Decepticon suspiciously, but Megatron's expression remained neutral.

"I don't think this is the proper day to ask you complicated questions. I'll just ask two in a row during one of our next meetings. Go home, Optimus Prime. Story time is over."

With that said, he demonstratively closed his optics, leaving Optimus to gawk at him for a while. It was a wrong thing to feel... And an appalling, *disastrous* thing to say aloud – but as Optimus spun around, preparing to leave, he couldn't stop himself from whispering:

"Thank you."

It was very, very late when Optimus finally landed at the doorstep of his little hab suite. He knew he wasn't supposed to use his jetpack in civilian areas, but he was tired and soaking wet (he flew into a raincloud on the way back), and he really was in no mood for dealing with curfew patrols.

The door closed behind him with a soft snick, shutting off the darkness and the icy wind. Optimus went to the washracks on his automatics alone, but after that instead of falling into his berth he dropped on the floor beside it, back against its base. His head was heavy, like it was overflowing with too much data for his CPU to process, his body felt more beaten than after the final battle on Earth... He doubted he could fall into recharge like this.

An image of Ultra Magnus flying through the air with his head over heels arose before Optimus's optics, and he chuckled. No wonder the Autobot Commander was so strict about rules and safety regulations. And no wonder he covered up that story; how many cadets would try to copy him if they knew of that stunt their stern Magnus pulled off?

He had always... cared for them. No matter how strict Ultra Magnus seemed sometimes, he ultimately did what he believed would be better for them. He... Optimus missed him so much!

It was like some dam inside him was finally broken. Hiding his face in his knees, Optimus Prime sat on the floor of his small room and cried his spark out.

Part I, Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Pseudonym-Synonym, who gave me a certain little idea. ;)

Optimus was sitting at his desk, Medical Guild's official contact page open on his screen. His finger was hovering over the 'call' button as he pondered his possibilities.

Should he request that medics examine the Decepticons in Trypticon prison? Yes, true, they were criminals and deserved to be punished, but denying medical help to the POWs wasn't the Autobot way... was it? Megatron's wounds in particular weren't something that could be dealt with by self-repair. Optimus felt uncomfortable when he recalled casually talking to a seriously injured person like it was nothing out of ordinary.

On the other hand... Won't it incriminate him? Optimus was a bit worried that his visits to Kaon hadn't been brought up by *anyone*. Surely they couldn't have been overlooked, and Optimus didn't make a big secret out of them... But he was prepared for at least some reaction: suspicions, arguments, reprimands. Yet there were none, and that, too, made him feel on edge, made him deliberate over his next steps very carefully. Like the idea of offering medical attention to Megatron. People might begin questioning if he started caring about the Decepticon leader.

And... did he?

Was he really beginning to feel sympathy for the warlord? Sure, Megatron had been, for the lack of a better word, considerate to him, but this could be a part of his plan to worm his way into Optimus's spark, to use his Autobot "respect all life" coding against him. Was Optimus stupid enough to play right into Megatron's hands?

Where was the line between avoiding manipulation and forfeiting basic ethic principles?

But even the problem of medical aid aside, Megatron was on his mind too often lately. It was unhealthy, but Optimus couldn't do anything about it. Fragments of their conversations emerged from the depths of his processor now and then, and the warlord's voice mocked him with reminders of those many nights in the past when Optimus overloaded to the sound of it, leaving him flustered and bothered and angry at himself. But what was even worse – it became hard to see the Decepticon just as an enemy, an embodiment of everything Optimus was supposed to fight against; no, he was getting to know Megatron as a mech – and this was, perhaps, the scariest thing of all. The realization that the Autobots' foes were people just like them.

It made Optimus wonder what kind of person Megatron was before the war, so one evening he gave in and found himself surrounded by datapads and holographic windows with articles. Oddly enough, no biographies or historical chronicles shed any light on that: all of them described Megatron as a gladiator who rose to power thanks to his rhetorics, treacherously murdered the previous Decepticon leader Megazarak and started the civil war. But Optimus knew that gladiatorial arena used to be the place where warbuilds *ended up* for breaking the law; so what was Megatron's story? How did he become a gladiator and what did he do before that?

It was very strange that there was so little information about such a prominent historical figure,

now that Optimus thought about it.

...Okay, maybe Optimus thought about it too much. Such a fixation on Megatron was definitely not doing him any good. Perhaps he needed a distraction.

Closing all texts, the Prime stood up and strolled to the exit, deciding to take a walk to clear his head.

It wasn't past the curfew time yet, but Iacon's streets appeared pretty deserted. Those few pedestrians Optimus met walked hastily without sparing him a moment's attention (a significant contrast to midday, when what seemed like half of the city's population was swarming around Optimus, begging for an autograph or a handshake). Electric lights were burning bright, chasing the twilight away from Iacon's broad boulevards, but somehow familiar places didn't look friendly right now.

Bars and cafés Optimus remembered frequenting during his Academy years were closed, their windows hidden behind iron shutters. Walls were covered by posters littered with words like "war", "treason" and "Decepticon menace". Patrol squads marched past Optimus twice, their heavy armor clanking in the unnatural quiet.

The only other things that disturbed this quiet were videos. On large billboard screens usually reserved for advertisements, on smaller screens in the shops' showcases – there were different video clips, but their messages were similar.

"We must protect our home from the Decepticons, who will stop at nothing to destroy our way of life."

"Report all suspicious activity! Remember: anybody could be a spy; you neighbors, your colleagues, your friends. Don't let them deceive you! Don't let the story of Longarm Prime repeat!"

"All effort is war effort! We are all cogs in the great Autobot machine. Don't let it stall because of you!"

"Report all Decepticon activity. Don't be the rusty link in the chain!"

"I am Sentinel Magnus, and I approve of this message!"

Optimus shuddered involuntarily, watching another video end. It wasn't surprising that people were so hostile towards the Jettwins, with all this fear-mongering keeping them on edge. And what will the Jettwins think of themselves among all this mistrust and resentment?

Cybertron was slowly being wrapped into a thick suffocating fog or paranoia, but no amount of persuasion could convince Sentinel to tune it down.

Optimus wasn't sure what he was going to ask when he set off for Kaon the next day. It was just... something that he had to do; a quest for peace of mind. If Ratchet was here, he'd doubtlessly have *a lot* to say about that, and Optimus would be the first one to agree with him. Nevertheless, as insane as it was, but the young Prime really had no one else to rely on. The Jettwins wouldn't be able to share his concerns, Jazz, for all his open-mindedness and down-to-earth life approach, had been squinting suspiciously at Optimus's "upbringing techniques", and Sentinel... was Sentinel.

He really should've stopped and regarded his choices for a klik, but deliberately avoided it.

The sky over Kaon was bright for a change, and Hadeen's rays danced on the smooth surface of Trypticon's walls. The warden was in a good mood too, greeting Optimus like a favorite guest.

"Optimus Prime, welcome, welcome! Always a pleasure to see you! Sure hope your stay will bring you even more pleasure." He winked, but if there was a joke, Optimus didn't get it.

Pleasant weather outside had no effect on Trypticon's inner workings. Here everything was the same: bare corridors, indifferent electric lights and small shapes of Mini-Cons scurrying around. Cell block 456 wasn't an exception: it seemed that no matter how much happened in the big world, here time stood still.

Megatron didn't change as well.

"Hello, Optimus Prime," he gave a short casual nod, like a welcoming host offering a seat, and Optimus became acutely aware of the lack of chair that he, once again, had forgotten.

"Hello, Megatron," he mumbled, feeling increasingly stupid. Small talk had never been his forte, and the mere idea of small talk with the Decepticon leader was ridiculous. The fact that Megatron's voice now reminded him of that heinous, humiliating self-service program only increased the confusion. This little detail slipped Optimus's attention the last time they talked (which could be excused; Optimus was in no condition to care about anything but his sorrow); now, however, it was blazing in his mind, bringing back memories of all those times when young cadet Optimus overloaded at the Decepticon Lord's order.

"Well?"

Optimus nearly jumped when he heard that voice so close, and returned to reality. Megatron was studying him like a funny phenomenon, and the Prime coughed, trying to veil his embarrassment.

"Yeah... I came to ask you something."

"I figured out that much." To Optimus's surprise, there was no poison in Megatron's smile – just good-natured irony.

"Right. Okay." He made a pause to collect himself, and then peered right at the warlord's face. "Tell me, how do I raise two flightframes to be free and happy in the world where everybody around is taught to beware the flightframes?"

"You don't."

"Excuse me?" Optimus frowned, but Megatron didn't back off.

"You cannot raise two flightframes among the Autobots freely. You will have to teach them to lie and pretend – yes, Optimus Prime, *to deceive*. Teach them to hide what they are and behave like proper little Autobots; teach them to walk instead of flying on short distances, to hunch when they talk to mechs smaller than them, to ignore people who insult them or keep away from them. They are soldiers, so they'll have opportunities to express their... less socially accepted urges."

"But..." Optimus shook his head. "No; no, this is wrong. They are already asking why there are people who condemn them on sight. I don't want them to think there *is* something in them worth condemning. They might have some non-Autobot traits, but that doesn't make them lesser Autobots."

Optimus didn't know what response he expected – but it definitely wasn't laughter. Dumbfounded, he could only stare as Megatron threw his head back and laughed, his immense grey frame shaking slightly.

“Oh, Optimus Prime,” the Decepticon chuckled, slanted optics twinkling, “you claim to have studied history, you are the current Magnus's friend, and you honestly believe that your kin would accept anything even remotely non-Autobot? You personally know Omega Supreme,” Megatron's tone became harsh, biting. “Didn't it give you a good example of what Autobots do to warbuilds – even those they created?”

Something cold and heavy seeped into Optimus's EM field.

“What do you mean?” he whispered, torn between the wish to rebuke, deny every accusation – and some subtle dread rising in his spark.

“Isn't that obvious?” Megatron's lips twitched in a spiteful sneer. “Desperate to win the war, the Autobots had to resort to drastic measures; they created their own warbuilds of immeasurable might – the Omega Sentinels. But they were so afraid of us, that they did everything they could to ensure that these living weapons of mass destruction never go out of control. The Autobots made them with limited intelligence, so that they would not question their orders; Autobots made them reliant on a special recognition code, so that they would always depend on their mentor bots whose words would be law for them; Autobots programmed them ‘to sacrifice and protect’,” Megatron's face contorted in disgust he couldn't suppress, and the stasis cuffs clanked as he balled up his fists. “This is how your kind wants to see my kind, Autobot! Dumb, obedient and enslaved – and even then you will fear us. This is what awaits your flying twins,” he added a bit more calmly. “If they are not cautious enough, that is. The Elite Guard will tolerate them while they are useful, but don't assume that they will ever be considered anything but a dangerous weapon.”

“Why are you so concerned for them all of a sudden?” Optimus inquired, observing Megatron's face intently. “Flightframes or not, they are your enemies.”

“Because they are the first Decepticon newsparks in four million stellar cycles,” Megatron replied simply – and scowled at Optimus's flabbergasted expression. “We are exiled from Cybertron, and thus have no access to Vector Sigma; you Autobots did everything in your power to keep the Allspark away from us. There had been no young Decepticons since the Great War; the only new additions to our ranks were the few turncoats like your friend Blackarachnia, or some clones, most of them with severe impairments in their programming. So forgive me for being concerned for those flying twins of yours,” Megatron smirked, although it didn't come out very convincing. “I still hope that, despite your best efforts, they will soon realize that there is no place for them among Autobots.”

“I will not allow it,” Optimus straightened his back. “I won't let them turn into Decepticons.”

“I'm afraid it isn't something you can fully control.”

Optimus bit his lip, trying to sort out his conflicted emotions. He couldn't deny that Megatron's words affected him. He had never thought about this before – that all Decepticons he saw were war veterans, and that without the Allspark and access to Cybertron they had no way to procreate. To know that your race is doomed to extinction must be a terrible burden to bear. And... He did remember that Omega Supreme's first action after his awakening from his long stasis was to willingly sacrifice himself again in order to save a bunch of Autobots he didn't even know. It was a heroic thing to do... but would Optimus want such selflessness for his young friends? Would Optimus encourage it?

Was it a necessary security measure for someone so dangerous?

This line of thought was interrupted by Megatron.

“If you’re done for today, I would like to move on to my questions.”

Optimus opened his mouth, automatically searching for a reason to decline – but then sighed and nodded in agreement. He sealed his fate the day he made this bargain.

“Fine... Go on,” he made a dismissing gesture, suddenly very tired and annoyed. Why did he come here anyway? There was no urgent problems, no changes in the twins’ behavior. Peace of mind? By the Allspark, who seeks peace of mind in Megatron’s company?

“What are your plans for the future?”

Optimus blinked.

“You are asking me... about my plans for the future?” This was like some bizarre career day at school. Only with the Decepticon warlord as the teacher.

“I believe I made it rather clear.”

“I...” Optimus was going to say that this question was elementary and not worth wasting your precious hard-earned chances... But then he realized that he had no answer. “I... don’t know? I want to serve the Autobot cause, win the war for my people and protect Cybertron. These are my plans, I guess.”

“But what will be your part in the victory? How will you ‘serve the Autobot cause’?” there was a tang of mockery in Megatron’s tone when he pronounced that, but otherwise he remained dead serious.

Optimus fidgeted. Were he that wide-eyed cadet, he would know what to say: he was going to become an Elite Guard officer and lead his squad into battle. But now...

“I am going to serve my Magnus and fulfill my duty,” he said quietly.

“Like a simple soldier?” Megatron raised his optic ridges. “You will obey Sentinel’s orders and go into battle according to his whims?”

“It’s not that I have a choice,” Optimus looked at the warlord sullenly. “I swore allegiance to him, and I doubt Sentinel would let me get any chance to ‘steal more glory’ from him. He can barely tolerate the praises I get after my Earth escapade, I doubt he’d...” He stopped abruptly, suddenly realizing just *what* and *to whom* he had just said.

He complained about his rightful Magnus to the lord of the Decepticons.

Who, by all means, wasn’t going to let this slip.

“So let me sum it up,” Megatron murmured slowly. “Sentinel Magnus, who, as you stated yourself, blames you for the death of your friend, becomes your superior. He despises you for demonstrating more talent than him. And you, the mech who stopped my conquest of Cybertron, allow him to make decisions for you?”

Oh, but Megatron doesn’t know the full story, a nasty oily voice whispered to his audial. He doesn’t know about all the humiliation and derogatory scoffs Sentinel has been pouring onto you;

he doesn't know how lonely you feel, how you are being turned into a pretty symbol, a jewel adorning Sentinel's crown, useful as an inspiration but nothing more, while Sentinel chokes Cybertron with fear.

"I am not a traitor," Optimus managed to utter.

"Not a traitor to whom – Sentinel or those two little flyers you made your wards?"

Optimus blinked, not quite following.

"What do you mean?"

"If your Magnus gives an order to terminate them, what will you do?"

"I... He wouldn't do it," Optimus objected and didn't believe himself.

"I don't recognize you, Optimus Prime," Megatron shook his head. "Why are you so scared to make your own decisions? The Autobot I fought on Earth wasn't afraid to take the initiative; that Autobot carried the Magnus Hammer like he was protoformed with it in hand. You could become the next Magnus instead of Sentinel if you played your cards right after your triumphant return from Earth."

Optimus felt his face heating up rapidly. What... What *was* it with this slaggin' Decepticon?! Abashed and enraged and uncertain how to hide his embarrassment, he opted for another charge:

"Do you suggest I undermine my commanding officer, my friend? Maybe even kill him like you killed Megazarak?"

Megatron's optics darkened.

"Don't talk about what you don't understand. Megazarak got what was coming to him." He crossed his arms. "All I'm asking for is this: next time you will be wasting your time following an order that can cause nothing but trouble, halt for a moment and think: is this the sort of hero you wished to be in the Academy?"

Optimus should have left right after their exchange. He should have. But there was one more thing that he came to do... He would be a coward if he ran away without doing it.

Resetting his vocalizer, Optimus turned to the control panel and switched the cell's settings from forcefield to energy bars. When he faced Megatron again, the warlord was contemplating him with mild curiosity.

"What is it, Optimus Prime? Want to boast your achievements with mastering the sparkling lock?"

"No," Optimus met the Decepticon's gaze bravely. Despite his accusations, Optimus didn't lose his ability to make risky decisions he deemed right. "I brought you a pack of repair nanites."

Optimus could be proud of himself: he actually succeeded at surprising Megatron, even though the Decepticon was quick to reestablish control over his emotions.

"I prefer to be paid in answers," he replied, but Optimus waved his hand.

"This is outside of our deal. Consider it a proof of my youth and naivety or something."

“Won’t it get you in trouble?”

Optimus grinned.

“Since when are you worried about my well-being, Megatron? But no, it won’t, unless you begin boasting about my generosity to your jailers.”

He would’ve continued blabbering if Megatron showed any sign of skepticism or humor, but, bless the Allspark, the Decepticon kept a perfectly neutral mien.

“Here, take it,” Optimus approached the bars and offered the injector on an open palm. “My only condition is that you activate it right now, under my supervision.”

“I cannot activate it,” Megatron allowed himself a bitter smile. “I’m in stasis cuffs, remember? Fine motor skills are currently beyond me.”

Damn! Optimus looked at the injector helplessly, but then clenched his hand around it. He wasn’t going to back away because of a minor obstacle.

“Fine,” he said sternly. “I’ll do it. Move closer and show me your injury; that you can do, right?”

Apparently, he caught Megatron unawares for the second time during this day: the warlord lingered for a moment, but then rose to his feet heavily. What Optimus didn’t expect was for Megatron to go down on one knee in front of the bars. This put their faces on nearly the same level, and Optimus has to physically stop himself from recoiling; those red optics were unsettlingly close, too close for comfort – and, despite their height difference being dwindled somewhat, he felt even smaller compared to the massive Decepticon.

Optimus gritted his dental plates, refusing to give in to instincts that were screaming at him to get away. An unwanted memory came and went – of this very face taking over the previously nonexistent features of Optimus’s dream bot, and then - of how Megatron had him tied up with his own grapple cord, holding him just as close. The Prime manually overrode his cooling systems and folded his EM field tightly to his body. He was in control of the situation. He was going to use the injector and leave.

“Put your hands behind your head,” Optimus ordered. He wasn’t having any "accidents"... and he didn’t trust the Decepticon.

Megatron grinned, but complied. The joints in his armor-less shoulder creaked, and Optimus winced. He couldn’t do anything about the missing plating or the cracks and dents in existing panels, but at least he could mend the damaged circuitry.

Gathering up all his courage, Optimus moved his free hand between the bars and placed it on Megatron’s chest, right above the largest gash. He did touch the Decepticon before – he had to, in order to deliver his blows in battle – but never so... gently. Without the intent to harm. The grey plating was warm, and just a bit further to the left Optimus was sensing the steady pulse of a spark; his thumb traced the jagged edge of the wound, where a chunk of metal was torn off. Megatron shivered a little under his touch, and this snapped Optimus out of his short trance. Right, the nanites. He was supposed to be healing this, not... whatever he was doing.

“It might hurt,” he warned, causing Megatron to sneer. Fine, if the Decepticon was going to play a tough guy, let him. Leaning a bit closer in order to see better, Optimus allowed his finger to delve into the gash, tracing the exposed circuitry. He was no medic, but first aid was an obligatory course for any Autobot cadet, so he knew what he was looking for: his fingertips were sliding through the

mess of melted nodes, torn wires and scorched contacts, seeking a more or less clear spot devoid of dead machinery. To Megatron's credit, he didn't even flinch; the only sign of pain he displayed was the slightly brighter glow of his optics.

Finally Optimus found what he was looking for. He spread the tangled wiring, rubbed the grime off the components that nobody bothered to clean, then flicked the injector's protective cap open and pushed it through the gap between the bars. When the tip of the injector came in contact with the tender circuitry, Optimus pressed the button – and the gel rich with repair nanites entered the open wound.

“There,” Optimus put the emptied capsule aside. “It won't do much without a proper patch to cover it, but at least it will isolate the distorted area and lessen the chance of rust infection.”

“You are very careful with your hands.”

This might've sounded sarcastic, since the young Prime still had his hand pressed to Megatron's wound, but there was no sarcasm in the warlord's tone. That touch was probably painful... yet for some reason Optimus couldn't force his palm away. Instead, his gaze darted up to meet Megatron's to challenge and check his sincerity, - and remained fixed there, as if enchanted. Young Autobots loved joking about how “ugly” the 'cons were – but now, when Optimus had Megatron's face so close to him, he knew he would lie if he called it ugly. It was *exotic* – with slanted optics and pronounced cheekbones highlighted by black paint. And now, as Megatron was smiling, Optimus could see the tips of the fangs between parted lips.

It was some sort of delirium that urged him to do it, but his hand rose from Megatron's injured chest to hover near his face for a klik – and finally lie on his cheek. Strange curiosity took over Optimus as he watched his own fingers like they belonged to somebody else – exploring the unknown territory; a single digit trailed the curve of Megatron's lower lip, paused, marveling at the unexpected softness (who could've guessed that the warbuild's lips would be soft? They appeared cold and cruel, like the orders that were falling from them) – but then those lips moved, and something hot and wet whisked against the fingertip.

A shudder ran through Optimus's entire frame, but he couldn't tear his optics off the view – as Megatron's red gaze pierced him, commanding and lenient and *playful*, as he opened his mouth wider, never ceasing to smile, as the tip of the glossa brushed Optimus's finger again, this time firmer, swirled around it, pulling it in. Dental plates closed around it, pushing gently, a tease rather than a bite, but there was still a sharp thrill sending shivers down Optimus's spine, and he curled his finger – just a little, just to feel that supple glossa give in, slide to the side and caress the intruding digit, coax it into a game two could play...

And then it dawned upon Optimus just *what* he had been doing.

He let out a pathetic, choked half-wheeze, half-whimper and snatched his hand back, jumping away from the cell like burned. He *was* burning! Heat scorched his cheeks and antennae, his spark was pounding in its casing, and the wetness on his finger felt like acid. Megatron was studying him with the same calm, pleasant expression, like he hadn't been kissing Optimus just moments ago, and that was a kiss, not on the lips, bless the Allspark, but they were kissing, Optimus allowed himself to be kissed by... by...

Hunted and helpless and distraught, Optimus mashed the buttons on the controller, switching the bars into forcefield, and ran.

Part I, Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Dear Qui, if you're reading this - the Kup cameo is for you. :) Thank you for your help with development of this fic!

Scrap. Scrap. Scrap.

Optimus rolled on his berth, face hidden in palms, and groaned, memories assaulting his processor without mercy. He spent the entire solar cycle confined in his room, unable to show himself to the world. His fingers ached where Megatron's glossa caressed them; Optimus still felt that hot, slick, gentle touch, still felt the texture of that vulnerable circuitry under his digits. How could he do it? How could he allow this... *this*?!

Traitor. Pervert. Dumb glitch.

He should've known something was off when his self-service program went haywire. It should've been a warning to him, but he ignored it; he let the Decepticon leader get close to him. But the program was only a small part of the problem; it was one thing to indulge in something virtual, something that was Optimus's little secret. But he showed his interest to Megatron of all people!

Wait, no. What interest?!

Optimus curled up into a ball, chewing on his lips and quietly howling in shame. There was no interest; he hated Megatron! Aright, maybe hate was too strong a word, but Optimus certainly didn't like him. There were no 'suppressed desires' or something equally sappy, Optimus never dreamed of Megatron as he was! So yes, the mech had a nice voice; but he wasn't the only one with such a trait! Yet Optimus chose to get all handsy with his sworn enemy.

What was wrong with him? How did it even come to this? Megatron was a Decepticon, a vicious, savage creature; no Autobot in their right mind would find him attractive. More than that, he was the Decepticon leader! Megatron brought death and destruction to everything his optics lay on. How in the world did a simple act of compassion turn into such... filth?

He must never return to Kaon. By the Allspark, Optimus didn't want to see Kaon ever again! He learned all he needed, the Jettwins were doing fine; in fact, his last two visits were absolutely uncalled for. He could've lived without them, but for some reason he still went to Trypticon.

"Open for me, Optimus Prime," Megatron's deep baritone purred into his audial, sounding incredibly dirty and suggestive. He never sounded quite like that in reality. A shudder ran through Optimus's frame, but he couldn't say if it was caused by disgust. The Decepticon was messing with him; why else would he do... that thing he did?

No, Optimus wouldn't give him this pleasure anymore.

Next day Optimus finally collected himself enough to appear on public. He greeted his acquaintances and colleagues with the usual (if a bit stiff) smile, sorted the paperwork that piled up

during the day he was absent, and went to the scheduled training session where he was supposed to teach Academy cadets. Fortunately, it was a battle training, and when it ended Optimus escaped before his students could corner him and bombard him with questions about how he fought the Decepticons. Optimus wasn't in the best mood for speaking about that.

In fact, perhaps he'd have been glad to have somebody to confide in, but there was no one whom he could trust with such a dubious matter. Optimus's own mind felt too turgid, constantly returning to the same phrases and concepts.

In the afternoon he found himself wandering aimlessly around Fortress Maximus. Awed whispers followed him around, but, luckily, no reporters attacked him today; Optimus was grateful to Sentinel, who forbade civilians to approach military facilities except for specially arranged occasions.

His legs carried him to the square before Elite Guard's hospital, which brought back memories Optimus didn't quite welcome right now: Ratchet and Arcee (who were so far away, preparing for war, and the calls were monitored), Ultra Magnus (who was dead dead *dead*, why did you leave us so early, sir?)... Immersed into his thoughts, Optimus bumped into some bot and muttered an apology – when his CPU beeped with recognition. He knew this scuffed teal armor.

“Kup?” Optimus turned to the bot, and a grin bloomed on his face – the first truly positive expression he had today. “Sir, it's you!”

The old mech laughed, his raspy chuckle like music to Optimus's audials.

“I believe it is me who should call you 'sir', since you outrank me now. You're a Prime, but I'm still a Minor.”

“You will always be my old drill sergeant to me,” Optimus looked him over, warmth filling his spark. After all these years Kup didn't change: faceplate worn out with age, green and teal paintjob littered with scratches he didn't bother to buff, even his gruff but friendly demeanor was the same. “How've you been doing?”

“I was retired, but your buddy Sentinel called, said he needed me because of the upcoming war. So I'm working again, teaching the young pests the basics of survival,” the old bot smiled, fondness in his optics contrasting with his grumpy words. “Somebody's gotta do it. Guess I found my place in life, huh?”

“I'm sure there is nobody better than you. Those young bots are lucky,” Optimus smiled at his own memories of learning under Kup. “What are you doing here, by the way?”

The corners of Kup's mouth instantly went down.

“Yeah, that... I'm visiting Roddy – I mean, Rodimus,” he corrected himself. “The 'cons used biological weaponry on him; got hit with cosmic rust. He's still recovering.”

“Rodimus? 'The Chosen One'?” Optimus didn't know that bot well – Rodimus studied in the Academy several levels younger – but heard enough. The prodigy, the pride of his class, labeled “the Chosen One” by teachers and peers.

“Yeah... Poor kid,” Kup averted his optics. “Doctors can't tell if he'll ever walk again.”

A painful bolt of guilt pierced Optimus; here's what the Decepticons do, here's the result of their cruelty. And you fraternize with their leader! Traitor. Sick wretch.

“Kid? You okay?”

“Huh? Oh, I'm... Well...” Optimus darted a hunted glance at Kup, sudden terror grasping his spark. The old bot had all the rights to condemn him and curse him if he knew of Optimus's crime... And it was tempting. To confess, to finally put this off his chest and receive the degradation he deserved.

“You look like someone who needs ta vent.” Kup grabbed his shoulder. “How ‘bout we find a quiet place, get a couple o'cubes and have a talk?”

Something tightened inside, gnawing at Optimus's spark, and he forced himself to smile as the words fell from his lips:

“Yeah... I'd be glad to.”

The quiet place turned out to be Kup's own hab suite – a messy and untidy flat that clearly needed a caring hand. Kup cleaned his table by moving all empty cubes and datapads to the shelf and pushed a fresh can of high grade into his hands.

“So,” Kup flopped on a stool across the table and opened his own can. “What's been bothering you?”

Optimus scrutinized his drink for a moment, pondering just how he could present his problem so that it didn't appear too weird and treason-like... But when he opened his mouth, what came out of it was blunt truth.

“Say, Kup... What does one do to stop being attracted to a Decepticon?”

There. He voiced it. Somehow saying it out loud made his fear of this admission to weaken; however, it also confirmed that he actually *did* find a Decepticon attractive. Before this Optimus managed to hide behind “I was a young fool when I came up with that self-service program” and “it was a temporary madness”, but now he couldn't quite escape his shame anymore.

But, to Optimus's bafflement, Kup didn't gasp or grab his head in horror; frankly speaking, he didn't even appear that surprised.

“One of our prisoners caught your optic, huh?” He sipped from his can and winked to Optimus, but grew more serious at noticing the young Prime's reaction. “Hey, calm down; I'm not gonna ask who. And before your jaw falls off, you're not the first bot who came to me with such a confession during my long years of service.”

“W-what?!” As if to challenge Kup's joke, Optimus's jaw dropped.

“Listen, kid,” Kup put his can aside and clasped his hands. “I will tell you the same thing I told your predecessors. There is nothing wrong with finding the 'cons attractive. They are normal mechs and femmes like us, just a little different, and let's be honest, some o'those frames are utter masterpieces. Despite all things they teach you in school, your body and CPU knows better. So no, you're not some sort o'pervert,” he grinned.

“But, but...” Optimus opened and closed his mouth like an Earthian fish out of water. “How can you say that? The Decepticons hurt your friends! Crippled Rodimus! They are vile and aggressive and prone to debauchery!”

“Blah-blah-blah, I know the school stuff, you don't need repeat it,” Kup waved his hand. “Look...” He rubbed his chin, taking a short pause. “We've been at war for millions of stellar cycles, and there is a pit's load of bad blood between us. But I've met a lot of Autobots for whom I don't have a single kind word, and I've met pretty decent Decepticons. Like that time when I was stranded on Clemency,” Kup's optics became glazed, as always when he was ready to dive into one of his endless stories. “There was that Krok guy with his crew, a very respectable guy, I must admit, and trust me when I say that he knew how to wield a spike...”

Optimus coughed, interrupting Kup's flood of memories; the Prime wasn't sure he was ready for a tale of Kup's adventures featuring some Decepticon's private equipment.

“Anyway, what I meant to say is that all the propaganda stuff they feed you in school and the Academy is slag. The 'cons are not monsters from a fable, they're just another type of Cybertronians who once lived beside us and are pretty much compatible with us, if you know what I mean. And now you have two ways in front of you: you either accept this infatuation as impossible and move on... or you act on it.”

“Kup.” Optimus leaned over the table, optics wide and incredulous. “Are you advising me *to make a move* on a Decepticon prisoner?”

The old mech shrugged.

“I won't advise you anything since I don't know your situation, but why not? I don't mean coercion, but if you ask 'em directly there is a chance your paramour wouldn't reject you. I know it is widely presumed that all 'cons are whores, but they aren't; they're simply more casual about interface than us. Just don't let the slagger manipulate you into easing the conditions for 'em.”

Optimus sat back, blinking owlishly and trying to wrap his mind around what he'd just heard. Yet what was most important... Kup didn't judge him. Kup didn't condemn him.

And, while Optimus had absolutely no intention to ask Megatron directly (*oh sweet Allspark, he didn't need the imagery!*), it surely was nice to have someone not freak out and approach this matter as something regular and almost normal.

Optimus did need a bit of normal of late.

After their talk with Kup distracting himself with work became easier. Optimus still felt dirty every time a long pause in his activities caused recent memories to resurface, but at least now there was Kup's gruff, wonderfully *sane* voice assuring him that everything was alright and it was all natural. The old mech's down-to-earth attitude served as a healing ointment.

It was just his frame's reaction, nothing more. It was... no worse than finding Elita attractive. She was off-limits, being Sentinel's girlfriend, and Optimus wasn't in love with her... But he did give her attributes to his dream bot too. There was no difference, right? He was never going to make a move on Elita, just like he *definitely* was never going to make a move on Megatron. What happened... was a mistake. His frame's basic reaction on being close to a mech it fancied. It didn't mean that Optimus held any sort of *affection* towards the Decepticon leader. Medical help? That was just a gesture of gratitude in return for Megatron's refusal to take advantage of Optimus's vulnerable state after Ultra Magnus's death. Optimus was just being honorable.

And yet, even though Kup's advice was calming, it also awoke a strange kind of yearning in Optimus, a morbid curiosity.

“If you ask 'em directly there is a chance your paramour wouldn't reject you.”

Would he? Would Megatron really... *In theory...* Consider accepting his enemy's offer to interface?

This mere thought made Optimus's face flush and his cooling fans kick in. This was outrageous. Unheard of! Just... unbelievable.

But would he?

He kissed Optimus's finger. Megatron made the first step, turning a chaste, albeit ambiguous touch into something much more sensual. It was easy to see how Megatron could interpret Optimus's actions as an indecent proposal – and the fact that he responded to it made Optimus's head spin.

He was never going back to Kaon... But he couldn't escape those thoughts plaguing him.

And it was doubtlessly a plague, a disease, because only this could explain the fact that one evening Optimus gave in to that yearning and called for his self-service program.

The fantasy bot appeared before him, a virtual simulation created to delude his visual, audial and tactile receptors. He was back to normal – faceless and only a head or two taller than Optimus, plating painted with soft shades of blue, yellow and white. He didn't speak or move, and Optimus ex-vented in relief, only now realizing just how tense he was.

He paused once more, checking his resolve one last time. Everything seemed to be fine; did he really intend to go through with his plan? But no, he needed that – for his own peace of mind. Kup advised him to make a move, but Optimus had no desire to play games with his prisoner – not to mention that technically all sexual activities involving prisoners were non-consensual. Megatron was most likely forcing himself to act seductive in order to confuse and use his Autobot adversary. No, Optimus had other ways to get the Decepticon out of his system. That's right; he just needed to act it out in safe environment and forget about this mess.

Biting his lip, he took another moment to concentrate – and then activated the settings controls, adjusting them to new parameters.

The illusion flickered, shifted – and Optimus found himself face to face with a perfect replica of Megatron. The only difference was his size – somehow Optimus imagined him only slightly larger than Ultra Magnus. In addition, unlike real Megatron, this phantom was subordinate to Optimus's will; right now it was standing still, waiting for commands.

This notion fueled his confidence. Being close to real Megatron would be unnerving, but this was just a puppet, a harmless experiment. Growing bolder, Optimus randomly input one of the default scenarios he wrote for this program.

The phantom came to life. Its red optics focused on Optimus, and silvery lips (that Optimus learned were soft – *no-no-no, not the right thought*) curved in a cocky smirk that was alluring on the faceless bot's lips, but absolutely *blazing* on Megatron's, and Optimus made an involuntary step back, dazzled and frightened by his own reactions. His spark was throbbing in his chest, cooling fans roared to life, and he was so scared!

“Don't be afraid, Optimus Prime,” Megatron approached him in one stride but didn't raise a hand to physically comfort him. The phantom was programmed to read basic actions and respond accordingly (with orders to struggling, with sweet nothings to expressions of fear, with dirty talk to heightening temperature of Optimus's frame), but it couldn't really touch. The illusion's hands

moved only with Optimus's own.

Optimus gulped, realizing that they looked rather stupid just standing there, staring at each other. Forcing himself to keep his optics open, he slowly lifted his palm. Slightly trembling fingers lay on his cheek – and Megatron's hand followed, black fingers overlapping with his smaller blue ones. Optimus shivered, his own touch suddenly becoming different... electrifying. As if the illusionary mech was a specter, an anomaly disrupting his EM field.

Optimus stepped back, to his berth, and Megatron advanced, his hands roaming Optimus's plating slowly, tracing the edges and pausing to rub his segmented abdominal plates. The Prime gasped, struggling with desire to arch into this gentle but firm caress; he was being overwhelmed, swamped with emotions and sensation too intense to be normal during self-service. He *felt* Megatron's presence beside him, that immense mass of raw power, sophisticated intellect and broad EM field. Something akin to panic bubbled in him, and he gritted his dental plates, blocking his battle protocols that attempted to activate along with interface ones. It was embarrassing how fast he got revved up, how weak his knees became, how he was practically melting under the simplest of touches from his sworn enemy...

It was just a game. A make-believe. There was nothing wrong with Optimus indulging in this fantasy, Kup had said so. There was nothing wrong about his reactions. He'd do it just this one time, just to know what he's dealing with, and then he'd... be free from...

The backs of his knees bumped into his berth and Optimus fell on it, fuel tanks leaping. But he was still touching himself, and so Megatron kept his hands on his stomach as well, his grin widening as he leaned over Optimus, pushing him into the berth.

"What a good little mech," he murmured, kneading the thin abdominal plating, sending sweet tingles up Optimus's spine, and the Autobot let out a soft moan. "You look so good underneath me." That voice was positively *sinful*; it seemed to wrap around him and vibrate inside his chest, deep and velvety and terribly persuasive, and Optimus allowed himself to be swayed by it, rocked by the waves of pleasure coursing through his frame. His – Megatron's – hand ventured lower, between slender white thighs that Optimus spread shyly, and cupped his interface panel. Optimus gasped, EM field crackling with charge, arched his back, wide optics glued to the warlord's content face – and suddenly he was painfully aware that he was nearing an overload, without even a single touch to his equipment, overload to the image of the Decepticon leader dominating him on his own berth –

With a choked scream of terror Optimus shut his optics and switched the program off.

He was left lying on the berth, cooling fans' whirr thundering in the silent room, dental plates sunk into the back of his palm. His shoulders were trembling slightly as short bolts of charge danced over the seams of his armor, and unused spike and port pulsed with heat under his panel. His cheeks burned just as much, although not with arousal, but with bitter shame he couldn't repress.

He was so sick.

Rolling over to hide his face in the soft padding, Optimus raised his pelvis, standing on his knees, opened his panel and brought himself to overload with rough, punishing strokes, desperately trying not to think of anything.

The first envoy arrived from the Nebulon Republic, and, despite Sentinel's passion for important events, he delegated the task of greeting their guest to Optimus. The reason for this was simple:

Nebulons were organic.

“You have a lot of experience with courting fleshies, don't you, Optimus?” Sentinel gave his back a patronizing pat. “Just wash your hands after you shake this organic's appendage, will you?”

Optimus just sighed and ignored the comments. Fear of organics was common among the Autobots, but at least Sentinel had a reason for his resentment.

The Nebulon ambassador turned out to be a small humanoid of an Earthling's size, but with green skin and hairless head. He wore long colorful robes that, doubtlessly, indicated something, but Optimus had no idea what. The fact that he had a repulsor platform carry him around was a pleasant surprise: Optimus didn't have to feel uncomfortable by having to look down at his visitor and watch other Autobots' steps.

“I am Ashiree Izaran,” the Nebulon said after Optimus introduced himself, raising his hand in greeting (contrary to Sentinel's assumption, Nebulons didn't shake hands like humans). “It is an honor to meet you, Optimus Prime. I have heard much about the hero who saved Cybertron; please give my sincere gratitude to Sentinel Magnus for his choice of a welcoming committee.”

Optimus didn't really understand if it was a jab at Sentinel, but decided to let it slip. One of the reasons Optimus was here was that his friend despised civilian Councilors and preferred to give significant missions to the members of the Elite Guard... or at least those with a military rank.

“The honor is mine,” he replied neutrally. “Allow me to escort you to your quarters.” The official meeting with the ruling Council was planned for the evening.

“With pleasure.” The Nebulon pressed some buttons at his platform's control panel, and it followed Optimus, keeping at the level of his shoulder. He dismissed most of his entourage with a nod, and as they moved out they were accompanied only by both parties' ceremonial guard (that, fortunately, kept a polite distance). “But above all, please accept my deepest condolences on the passing of Ultra Magnus. This is truly a terrible loss.”

“Thank you,” Optimus answered quietly. “He is missed dearly.”

Fortunately, Izaran noticed his discomfort and casually changed the subject. Optimus was thankful.

At the end of their trip that turned into a tour around Iacon Optimus concluded that he liked the Nebulon ambassador. Izaran sported a good sense of humor and a manner of speech that, while remaining formal, had a lot of heart to it. It was a pleasure to have a clever, sharp-minded conversation partner.

Who was not Megatron. Yeah.

“By the way, Optimus Prime, I know that you battled Megatron and defeated him.”

Speak of the devil.

“I would like to express my admiration at such a deed, but, to be frank, I was also hoping that you would share your experience with me. Megatron has been absent from his Empire for quite a while, and, although I carried out negotiations with the Decepticons, I've never met him.”

“You negotiated with the Decepticons?” That caught Optimus's attention.

“I had the honor of speaking with General Strika. Quite an impressive lady. She surprised me with her steadfast loyalty to her lord Megatron, so I couldn't help but wonder. What is he like?”

Optimus kept silence for a klik, attention turned inwards. By the time he opened his mouth Izaran was observing his face intensely.

“Imposing. Cold-blooded. Powerful. Charming when he wants to be. *Incredibly* dangerous,” Optimus peered into Izaran’s eyes to make sure the Nebulon understood him. “You should be very careful when you meet him in person. Even behind bars, he will try to manipulate you. He's rather good at that.”

The ambassador nodded slowly.

“Noted, Optimus Prime. Thank you for your insight.” They both walked (or, in Izaran's case, flew) in silence for a while.

“I have to admit that all the changes in Cybertronian politics of late produced quite an uproar on Nebulos,” Izaran uttered at last, his tone more casual. “Your lifespans are infinite compared to ours, and generations of our diplomats have been taught to deal with Ultra Magnus and Megatron. We have treatises written on their psychology and political habits. Now our xenosociologists will have to rewrite their books and develop a new study plan.” He chuckled, and Optimus joined him, his mood lightened.

“So you are a brave pioneer venturing into unfamiliar waters?” The Prime cast a side glance at Izaran, suddenly much more cautious about him. If the government of the Nebulon Republic appointed him for such a tricky mission, Izaran was doubtlessly a figure to be reckoned with.

The ambassador gave him a mellow smile, but his eyes remained sharp.

“Of sorts.” He leaned on the railing of his repulsor platform. “I will be honest with you, Optimus Prime. We need the Decepticons to guard our trade routes; they might be vicious and hard to deal with sometimes, but they are the mightiest armed force available for hire in the galaxy. The planets they hold are too barren to support them, and they know it, so Megatron allows this “side business” despite finding it demeaning. And on the other side we have you. The Republic has no common borders with the Autobot Commonwealth, but we are separated by space belonging to the Quintessons and the Vok – two races that are known to be fond of expansion and... unsavory means of reaching their goals. Weakened Cybertron would mean a distorted balance – which might lead to our respected neighbors growing bold. I have an order from my president, Optimus Prime,” Izaran crossed his arms, his gaze serious and penetrating. “I must do everything in my power to make sure your peoples don't go to war with each other.”

Optimus kept silence for a klik.

“This is a noble goal, Ambassador Izaran,” he uttered at last. “And I wish you luck with it – although there is a very small chance of success. I'm afraid we are already at war.”

“Good job with the organic,” Sentinel was in such a jovial mood that he even spared some praise for Optimus. “I hope you did wash your hands?” He winked and laughed at his own joke.

“I didn't touch the ambassador,” Optimus answered neutrally. He had long stopped trying to do anything about Sentinel's phobia of organics.

“Whatever. More envoys will be arriving soon, and I'm charging you with the task of greeting them. You seem to have quite a knack for it. Better you than those Council grease blots. Oh, and one more thing,” Sentinel added as he walked him to the exit of the Magnus's spacious office.

“Now that we have foreign overseers watching our every step, you need to stop those visits to Kaon.”

Optimus's spark jumped in its casing, but he hoped his smile didn't turn very crooked. He had no illusions; he was sure that Sentinel was aware of his visits to the Trypticon prison, but for some reason the Magnus never brought them up.

“I don't want to rob you of pleasure well earned, but you know those nosy aliens and politicians: they'd be happy to find a reason to nag us. Doubt Megatron will elaborate,” he giggled, “but who knows how low a 'con is ready to fall.”

Optimus frowned, not quite following. A dull pain throbbed in his chest like a warning: there was something he overlooked, something he didn't understand, and it was something very unpleasant.

Sentinel stopped before the door and turned to Optimus, grinning.

“Was that port even worth the bother? I heard the 'cons can be true sluts if treated the right way.” He winked and elbowed Optimus's side. “But I guess he pissed you off so much, that the satisfaction of fragging that smirk off his face is enough. Must've been really fun if you went back so many times. But all good things have to end, sadly.”

Optimus's mind blanched.

“W-what..?” He gasped, having to reboot his vocalizer several times. “I... I didn't! How can you even..?”

But Sentinel just laughed and patted his shoulder.

“Yeah, that's great, Optimus, keep up the pretense. Of course it's absolutely unconceivable, for a proper Autobot to even consider touching a 'con – ew! Gross.” He winked and opened the door, pushing the Prime out. “Dun' worry, Optimus, old pal, I've got your back. Nobody will know.”

Optimus walked out on numb legs and didn't even flinch when the door shut right before his face.

Part I, Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Mentions and descriptions of non-con in this chapter, obviously.

They are fighting in the sky over Detroit again – Optimus's Magnus Hammer versus Megatron's cannon and twin swords. Last mighty strike of the Hammer – and Megatron falls to the ground, his plating shattered and circuitry sparking. Optimus lands nearby and walks to the wounded warlord who struggles to keep his systems running.

“What are you waiting for, Autobot? Finish me,” he manages to utter; his optics are tired and oddly calm – how can he be so calm when facing certain death? Optimus frowns as he raises the Magnus Hammer, but the blow lands next to Megatron's head, smashing his cannon.

“No, Megatron. You don't deserve it,” Optimus rasps, takes out stasis cuffs and shackles the Decepticon's wrists, briefly wondering why Megatron looks so unhappy with his life being spared...

The scene changes around them, and suddenly they are in Trypticon's cell. It is dark, and the only source of light is the forcefield, which is glowing bright, dispersing the darkness with its blue gleam. Megatron lies sprawled before Optimus, cuffed hands chained to the wall above his head; his injuries look as fresh as they were in the battlefield, and those stray bolts of electricity running over them are obviously painful. His legs are spread, and between them Optimus sees biolights blinking around a wrecked port, torn wires visible among misplaced components and a small puddle of coolant, energon and lubricant forming on the floor. Optimus is appalled at himself, but this is only a small part of him, detached from the Optimus who stands in the cell, palming his spike; this Optimus is pleased with his doing and contemplates his next step as he relishes the view.

“What, did you think I was finished with you?” that other Optimus asks, voice dripping with venom. Megatron looks up, and it's the same tired, almost indifferent expression he had when Optimus took him captive. There is no fury or humiliation in it, just serene resignation, and it pisses the other Optimus off. He presses his foot to the abused port, screwing his heel and smirking at Megatron's wince.

“You don't deserve it,” he hisses, his spike thrumming with charge. Oh, he could come just from the sight alone! He briefly toys with the idea of forcing his prisoner to suck him off – Megatron seems to be broken in enough to allow it – but impatience takes precedence, and he squeezes his overheating spike, friction making the charge hit its peak – and Optimus overloads, viscous drops of coolant fluid staining Megatron's shattered plating and bared circuitry, marking him, cementing his ultimate defeat –

And Optimus wakes up.

He sat up on his berth, fans working on maximum, his frame radiating heat and a disgusting lump wrenching in his stomach. Images from his dream danced before his optics, making it hard to distinguish them from reality, and for a couple of horrifying clicks Optimus actually believed that he had done everything he saw.

He switched the lights on and dragged himself to the washracks, familiar routine helping to dissolve the remains of the dream. Or rather, a nightmare. The visions rose before his optics again, and Optimus leaned on the wall, hands over his stomach, trying to force back the fit of nausea.

“Was that port even worth the bother? I heard the 'cons can be true sluts if treated the right way,” Sentinel's suggestive voice echoed in his audials, and Optimus closed his optics, face burning.

This explained everything. The warden's raunchy winks, the way Sentinel graciously “overlooked” his visits... All of them thought Optimus was taking out his frustrations on Megatron and reveling in his power over the enemy he brought down. They all thought Optimus would fall so low that he'd... By the Allspark. At least the Mini-Cons knew he didn't have any criminal intentions. Or so he hoped.

And Megatron... Optimus jerked up, stricken by a new revelation. Was that why Megatron was playing nice with him? Because he suspected Optimus could resort to something... something like that? Was that his attempt to avoid this final disgrace? Apparently, since so many Autobots didn't see anything wrong with this, it wasn't an unnecessary precaution.

Optimus jumped to his feet, grabbed his jetpack and headed to the exit, restlessness becoming unbearable. He was determined never to visit Trypticon prison again, but he couldn't sit still anymore. He didn't care currently that it was the middle of the night, or that it might get him in trouble with Sentinel – the only thing he knew was that he needed to see Megatron again. He needed to clarify all misunderstandings between them. He... he wasn't sure what else he needed.

Locking his door, Optimus unfurled the jetpack's wings and leapt into the air.

The warden, sleepy and disoriented, caught up with him when Optimus was already greeting Sureshock.

“Optimus Prime! So early in the morning... We haven't expected you...”

“Silence!” Optimus cast such an uncharacteristically dark glare at him, that the warden choked on his words and fell behind. The Prime didn't want to see him any more than it was inevitable.

Fortunately, the Mini-Cons didn't question Optimus's unexpected appearance (although Leader-1's unreadable yellow optics followed him cautiously – but the head of the Mini-Cons was cautious of everybody). Sureshock led him to the familiar cell block and left as always.

“Megatron!” Optimus pushed the buttons on the wall-mounted panel, switching forcefield to bars; he couldn't take these blueish hues distorting his vision, reminding him of his dream too much, and couldn't take this barrier separating him from his prisoner like another wall of lies. The remote controller for the cuffs would provide sufficient protection.

“Optimus Prime?” The Decepticon raised his optic ridges. “And here I thought I wouldn't be seeing you again.”

Optimus shook his head, dismissing empty courtesies.

“They think I've been raping you!” he blurted out, words that had been scalding his tongue finally given voice.

Megatron wasn't as impressed as Optimus anticipated.

“This doesn't surprise me,” he said, shrugging. “From what I know, this fantasy is quite popular among younger Autobots. I've seen those porn videos you produce.”

Optimus felt his face heat up. He saw those videos too; a good part of Cybertron's porn industry indeed thrived on the scenarios of “an Autobot in Decepticon captivity” and “a Decepticon in Autobot captivity”. The level of violence varied from plots where all parties were clearly enjoying themselves to outright rape and torture scenes. The latter ones always disturbed Optimus. And by the Allspark, to think that Megatron saw them! Videos where Autobots wore additional bulky armor and “wings” in order to pose as warbuilds (these videos usually had flame wars going in the comment sections, where people loudly complained about “fakes”) – and those rare, rare videos starring a *real* flightframe. They were the source of many forbidden fantasies for horny Autobot younglings and, as Optimus supposed, of great risk for the nameless Decepticons, whose commanders probably wouldn't be supportive of such a career. Out of sheer compassion Optimus hoped that none of those poor warbuilds were executed in case Megatron recognized them.

But those were just porn scenarios. Played out by actors. This was the real thing, and Optimus couldn't shake off the memories of the more gruesome videos – or his nightmare.

“This... This is beside the point!” Optimus shook his head and grabbed the energy bars. “Doesn't it bother you that your jailers consider it possible?! What about your soldiers?! They are kept here too, what about their safety?”

“Well, there is nothing I can do about it, isn't it?” Megatron half-shut his optics.

Optimus bit his lip, glancing downwards. Yes; when both the prison's warden and the Magnus of the planet found the prospect alluring, Megatron couldn't really hope for justice. And to think that Optimus almost missed it all...

“Do you want to?”

Optimus's vocalizer screeched and rebooted, EM field exploding with emotion as he raised his head to meet Megatron's mildly curious gaze.

“H-how...? How can you... I'm not like this!”

Or maybe you are, a nasty voice whispered in his mind. You did touch your prisoner inappropriately. Why not make the next step?

“I wouldn't say no if you asked.”

Optimus gaped at the warlord, mouth open and processor stalling. No way... There was no way he was hearing this. Kup did mention such a reaction, but Optimus never actually believed him!

“I... I... I won't ask.” Optimus gulped, flexing the fingers unconsciously. He wasn't able to tear his optics off Megatron's; that red gaze turned from lazy and mellow to practically *enflaming* and seemed to pierce Optimus's very core, pulling his deepest and darkest secrets to the surface. “I won't ask for something like that.” He repeated, this time more confidently. No matter what, he knew where he stood.

“Indeed?” Optimus flinched when Megatron's immense frame moved, but remained in his place. Megatron went on one knee in front of him, just like some solar cycles ago, and Optimus found himself peering right into those slanted optics.

His virtual simulation stood no chance when compared to the real Decepticon – but now Optimus realized the difference more than ever, and it wasn't even the size. His phantom didn't have this

incredible sense of danger about him, this overwhelming presence that put every single one of Optimus's reflexes on guard and sent sharp tingles down his spine. Everything in Optimus was preparing for a fight, but at the same time there was that tight sweet ache in his abdomen. Megatron's closeness made him feel alive, made him feel small and physically inferior – but also brave and determined.

How strange it was, that Optimus felt most confident when facing his greatest enemy.

And Megatron was giving him that charming smile from old Decepticon propaganda posters.

“You owe me a question, Optimus.” Megatron left the “Prime” part out, and a current of heat thundered down Optimus’s fuel lines. “*What do you want?*”

His voice was softer than usual, and the sound was caressing Optimus, flowing around him like a breeze. He was entranced. Enchanted. Because there was no way he was in his right mind when he said:

“I'm not kissing you.”

Red optics narrowed impishly.

“Then don't. I asked what you *wanted*.”

He was not kissing a Decepticon. He was not kissing *this* Decepticon. It was coercion. It was wrong. Everyone thought Optimus was taking advantage of the prisoner, and would he really take advantage? Was he really as disgusting as Sentinel thought?

But this is not interface, the same voice whispered in his audial. *This is not even a kiss*. Nothing he could be accused of, by law or by his conscience. And clearly Megatron wasn't protesting. In fact, he offered it himself. He said Optimus owed him, and he wanted to know what Optimus wanted...

Obedying an impulse he couldn't name or control anymore, Optimus lifted his free hand and put his fingers on the warlord's lips – like a gesture of defense.

Megatron took this wordless invitation with a throaty hum. His lips opened, urging Optimus to do more, and the Prime wasn't able to resist: a single finger slipped inside, testing the new grounds, only to be instantly met by a hot glossa. This time Optimus allowed himself to be lured; his finger joined the game, dancing around that tongue and rubbing against its slick pressure in an imitation of a kiss that was almost frighteningly *good*. Optimus's lips parted, every sensation from his fingertip resonating in his own mouth as he stared at the positively lewd display before him.

Megatron caught him staring – and his optics flashed in mischief as he grazed the tips of his fangs against Optimus's digit. It wasn't hard enough to be a proper bite, but it did hurt, and although the shiver that rocked the Prime's frame was far from unpleasant, he couldn't leave this misbehavior unpunished. Frowning, Optimus pushed his hand forward, forcing Megatron's jaws wider apart, and captured his glossa between his fingers. To his shock, Megatron didn't seem to mind: he simply tilted his head back a little and smirked with the corners of his mouth, turning the already obscene act into something truly debauched.

Optimus couldn't hold back a gasp. All his systems were running hot, and the demonstration of his dominance, small as it might be, sent a feverish rush through him. Optimus's fingers were coated in oral lubricant as he pinched and twisted Megatron's tongue, and Megatron allowed it, putting up a bit of resistance just to spice it up. If the hungry rev of his engine was anything to go by, he was more than happy to indulge.

Maybe too happy, actually. High on the power he felt right now, Optimus released Megatron's glossa and pushed his digits deep into his mouth – but Megatron caught them with his dental plates again, this time gently, and *sucked*.

Optimus's knees nearly gave up, and his vocalizer made an odd screechy sound. The stasis cuffs controller cracked in his grip. All his superiority was snatched from him in an instance, and he could only tremble as his fingers were laved with attention. The pleasure in his abdomen was growing painful, and he knew he should stop it, stop this immediately before it was too late...

Megatron seemed to notice his distress, because he gave Optimus's fingers one last lick and let go. The Prime slowly pulled his hand back, movement strangely hesitant. Despite the twinge of regret (which he quickly suppressed, no, no, he definitely didn't *regret*!) he was relieved that it was over; if it lasted a klik more, his systems could've started glitching from the strain. Silence hung between them, thick but not particularly unbearable, distorted by the roar of Optimus's cooling fans; there was simply not much they could say concerning what had just transpired. Optimus felt dizzy, like it wasn't exactly him standing here before the cell. It couldn't have been him; there was no way he'd do what he'd done. It was madness... and yet he somehow found himself in the very center of it.

He cleared his throat and rebooted his creaking vocalizer.

"Your... Your trial will be held soon. I won't be coming anymore."

"Then see you at the trial, I suppose?" Megatron murmured as he settled down on his bench heavily. "I can't wait for this farce."

"It..." Optimus blinked, trying to concentrate. "It is not a farce."

"A trial set for me by the Autobot High Command? Autobots judging Decepticon scum? Please," Megatron laughed. "I told you that before, Optimus. You are the current Magnus's friend; there is no way you are as naïve as you try to appear."

"Don't call me that." Optimus shifted.

"Hm?"

"'Optimus'. Don't call me 'Optimus'."

Megatron's optics twinkled.

"And here I thought you hated when I called you 'Autobot'."

"My name is *Optimus Prime*."

"A lover of formalities, eh? Taking after Ultra Magnus," Megatron chuckled under his breath and leaned on the wall; he looked weary, although he had no reason to be. Maybe the stasis cuffs made even that little amount of movement difficult.

It was really a time to leave, but Optimus lingered, the last question pulsing in his mind.

"Megatron?"

"What is it, Optimus Prime?" The warlord even *sounded* weary.

"Did..." Optimus gulped and grabbed the energy bars. "Did anyone here... do anything to you

that..." his voice faded, throat constricting around the unspoken words.

"No," Megatron cast side glance at him, optics shut to two narrow slits. "You are the only one who's brave enough."

Optimus wasn't sure if it was a compliment or a threat.

Instead of leaving right away, like he always did, this time Optimus stopped before the exit from the cell blocks and squatted, so that he was at the optic level with Sureshock. The orange Mini-Con beeped, confused.

"Sureshock, I... There is something I need to know. Is there any possibility that the prisoners in your custody might have had... illicit encounters with their visitors?"

Expressionless yellow optics blinked.

{ All visits: monitored. Illicit activities for prisoners and visitors are forbidden. Violators: punished. }

"But you don't monitor *me!* Or do you?" Optimus added suspiciously.

{ Optimus Prime: not monitored, as requested. Trustworthiness confirmed by Leader-1. }

"Trustworthiness?" Optimus mumbled, not quite sure what to make of it, but then another Mini-Con voice came from behind him.

{ Optimus Prime: no malign intentions. No risk for prison's regime. }

This darkly colored Mini-Con was none other but Leader-1, the infamously detached and unbending supervisor who could enforce Trypticon's rules on a Magnus without even flinching. Not that he had an ability to flinch, though; like all of his kin, Leader-1 had no real faceplate.

Optimus frowned, the Mini-Con's logic escaping him.

"How do you decide it? That I am trustworthy and the others are not?"

{ Optimus Prime: no malign intentions, } Leader-1 repeated like it explained everything.

"What about other Autobots? Do they have 'malign intentions'?"

Leader-1's little fingerless arms moved in a gesture Optimus didn't understand.

{ Possibility is accounted. Autobots: not authorized to watch over Decepticons. Different peoples: high danger of emotional response. Autobots run prisons for Autobots. Mini-Cons run Trypticon; Mini-Cons see everything. Optimus Prime's visit is over. }

There was no pause between two parts of Leader-1's speech, and Optimus's reaction was a bit belated.

"Huh? Oh, yes. Right. I'm leaving." He didn't want to irritate the Mini-Con supervisor. With time he got used to Sureshock, but there was something unnerving about Leader-1. Maybe it was necessary when one has a prison to take care of. Standing up, Optimus said his goodbyes and hurried to the door. He felt both Mini-Cons' stares on his back, but forced himself not to turn his head, as much as he wanted to.

Somehow Leader-1's words managed to calm him down. The Mini-Cons certainly recognized the potential dangers, and they were known for their acute neutrality. Why they made an exception for Optimus remained a mystery, but the young Prime decided not to dwell on that; the ways and abilities of Mini-Cons had always been beyond normal Cybertronians' understanding.

Fortress Maximus's mess hall probably remained the last place in Iacon that could be called a bar: Sentinel's public security measures demanded all gathering spots like Maccadam's Old Oil House to be closed. While civilians had to enjoy each other's company strictly in private, military mechs had the luxury of keeping their mess hall (and were silently praying that Sentinel didn't grow suspicious of this place as well – which was unlikely, since Sentinel stopped visiting the mess hall after he became the Magnus). Officially you could only buy your standard middle grade energon here, but nobody bought bootlegged engex officially.

Jetfire and Jetstorm, for instance, were exploiting their positions in the Elite Guard and spending their salary on cocktails (that were mixed to appear like normal energon).

"Hey, brother! Look what I can do!" Jetstorm was currently balancing a full shot on his forehead.

"Big deal! Look what *I* can do!" Jetfire snatched the glass away and downed it in one gulp.

"Hey! You slaghead!" Jetstorm pushed his brother to the side, grabbed his much larger glass and began drinking, which was a bit hard due to Jetfire struggling and trying to get his cocktail back.

"No! Gimme back! *You* are slaghead!"

"No, you!"

"No, you!"

"Will you two shut up?!" somebody shouted at them from another table.

Jetfire stood up and opened his mouth to retort, but Jetstorm kicked his leg.

"Hey! No starting fights with others! Remember what Optimus Prime say?"

"Right; we are Autobot Elite Guard." Jetfire's predatory grin disappeared.

"Best Autobots ever!"

"Fine," Jetfire dropped on his chair again. "No starting fights." He sounded a bit disappointed.

"But I wanna fight! Hope we get mission soon. Remember how we took down that Wasp spy who was Bumblebee in paint? We were *awesome*!"

"Yeah! But he was not spy, I think..." Jetstorm scratched his finial.

"Was fugitive anyway. Must be put in Stockades."

"I'd say it's you two who should be sent ta Stockades. Or bett'r ta Trypticon, where you... belong."

Jetfire and Jetstorm turned their heads simultaneously. A tall mech with Elite Guard markings was standing next to their table; he was swaying slightly, obviously overcharged.

"Sittin' 'ere... like you own the place... Fraggin' Decepticon crud."

“I believe you mistake,” Jetfire said, anger lurking behind his usual cheerful tone. “We are Autobots.”

Jetstorm squeezed his twin’s hand as a sign of support. They were going to be good and pull through this. They were going to make Optimus and Sentinel proud!

“What brother say. Want drink too?”

The mech’s optics narrowed. With a growl he brushed the glasses off the table and leaned on the cleared space.

“I dun’ drink with flyboys... ‘specially dirty gutter trash. Have you heard ‘urselves? You talk like those scrapheap crawlers from Dead End.”

The crash of the glasses attracted the other patrons’ attention. From around the mess hall blue optics were fixed on them, observing the unfurling drama, but nobody made a move to stop it.

Jetfire and Jetstorm rose to their feet slowly. Their plating was drawn tight, fingers flexing instinctively, and they bared the fangs they didn’t have.

“We are Autobots,” Jetfire repeated, but this time he didn’t bother to conceal his rage.

“You dun’ deserve this title!” the mech spat, words coming out even more slurred than before.

“Flying Autobots, what a disgusting *joke*! Sentinel’s a fraggin’ idiot, only a complete slaghead like him’d put...”

He didn’t have a chance to finish. The twins’ EM fields flared, and with a double snarl they attacked.

Optimus was listening to an old recording of one of Megatron’s speeches, which he dug out in Elite Guard’s archives. This one was completely unfamiliar to him, and with every minute Optimus understood more and more why these particular speeches were never distributed in the open. They could give insight into the way their enemies thought alright, but the worst thing was that Megatron actually sounded... reasonable! The audio file was in pretty bad condition and full of static – apparently, it was made by an undercover police agent who sneaked into one of the Decepticon gatherings, and Optimus had to concentrate really hard in order to catch everything, so he nearly missed his commlink beeping.

Sighing in annoyance, Optimus stopped the recording and opened his comm line.

[Yes, Jazz?]

[OP, we need you here. It’s the Jettwins.]

[Oh, by the Allspark...] Optimus rubbed his nasal ridge. [What did they do now?]

There was a pause.

[I’m afraid they’ve just killed a guy.]

Part I, Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Optimus appeared before the twins' cell in the remand prison under Fortress Maximus, Jetfire and Jetstorm jumped from their benches and ran to him.

"Sir!"

"We are sorry, sir!"

"We are so sorry!"

"It was an accident!"

"We tried to be good and not fight, like you told, but that guy, he..."

"He say horrible things about Sentinel Magnus!"

"Very bad things!"

"We just want to protect Sentinel Magnus's honor!"

"We didn't mean to kill him, honest!"

Optimus just hugged the twins through the bars, stopping their blabbering.

"I know, I know," he let his engine rumble idly – a soothing sound caretakers used to calm down frightened newsparks. "Jazz told me everything. I know you didn't mean to." It was easy to believe. The Jettwins were never known for being reserved; they were careless and excitable and easy-going. Just add a raging Decepticon coding they were only learning to control...

It was Optimus's fault as much as theirs. He should've watched them more closely. Instead he was just as reckless.

He forced back the lump in his throat and composed himself as he released the twins. He needed at least to seem strong and confident – for their sake.

"We will be sent to Stockades?" Jetfire asked ruefully.

Optimus shook his head.

"I don't know. You will face a court martial first, since both you and the victim are military personnel. But you will have to receive punishment." He tried not to sound too harsh, but this was something he felt was needed to be conveyed. The twins must understand that they committed a crime, and a dreadful one. The court will determine their punishment, fairly and justly.

"Autobots judging Decepticon scum? Please," Megatron's snide voice echoed in his mind.

Optimus shuddered involuntarily. The question of punishment, though... The obvious sentence for murder would be a prison term in the Stockades, and here was the problem: it meant confinement in a very small space for two mechs who carried the Seeker coding. This couldn't be allowed to happen.

Like in mockery, an image of Wasp flashed before Optimus's optics. Wasp went insane in the Stockades. True, he was prosecuted for a crime he didn't commit, and he might've been emotionally unstable...

But the twins were, in a way, definitely unstable. And provoked by the unfortunate drunkard. It didn't alleviate their guilt – but it added extenuating circumstances. Maybe they could work with that, make the court take it in consideration...

"There are some extenuating circumstances," he said out loud. "I'll see what can be done."

"We are so sorry, sir," Jetstorm looked crestfallen. "We disappointed you. And Sentinel Magnus too..."

Optimus's spark throbbed, but a little bell jingled in his head. *They are sorry because they disappointed you. Not because they killed a person. Is that their coding speaking? Or were they always like that?*

"We didn't hurt civilians," Jetfire whispered, the quiet, wavering tone seeming almost alien to him. "We do Autobot thing. Didn't hurt civilians." He looked at Optimus, his yellow optics flickering with barely restrained crying, and the young Prime bit the inside of his cheek, suddenly wishing for nothing but to run away and hide.

"I will talk to Sentinel," he managed to utter. "I'm sure he won't leave you in peril."

If only he was as convinced as he sounded.

"Sentinel?" Optimus made sure that the soundproof door was locked behind his back, and only then turned to his friend. "I need to talk to you."

"Yes, you were very insistent about that," Sentinel frowned; he didn't like being pushed. He was sitting at Ultra Magnus's – no, *his own* – desk in his spacious office, and Optimus felt like a meek petitioner seeking the great Magnus's favor. Which he was, in truth.

"It's about the Jettwins," he began, but Sentinel waved his hand, spinning on his chair a bit.

"Yes, yes, I know. The kids screwed up big time."

"They were trying to protect your name," Optimus started anew. "That mech whom they killed, he was insulting them, and then he called you a complete slaghe..."

"I read Jazz's report, Optimus," Sentinel coughed, interrupting him mid-sentence. "The guy was drunk, apparently. Can you imagine that they sold bootlegged engex to the soldiers? Right under my nose? Those glitches!"

He seemed too unfazed by the whole story. Optimus narrowed his optics.

"Sentinel..? The Jettwins... You don't plan on punishing them too severely, do you? Because there are extenuating circumstances and..."

Sentinel gawked at him and then bellowed with laughter.

"Optimus, buddy, what are you even talking about? Of course not! So the kids made a mess, well, what can I say, the guy had it coming. We'll sweep it under a rug for the time being, while we have

bigger things to deal with – Megatron and all, you know. I’ve just gotten a message that the Quintesson delegation is at our border. Tentacled freaks brought quite an entourage, I’ve no idea how to accommodate them all. But after we finally get rid of Megatron, we’ll see to the twins’ problem. They were just doing their job,” Sentinel rubbed his temple, scowling a little. “‘Complete slaghead’ he called me,” he muttered under his breath, but then focused his attention on Optimus and grinned. “Anyway! If that’s all you wanted to discuss, then off you go. Tell the twins they’d just need to kill time in the remand cell or something. Give them games to play, I dunno.” He made a dismissing gesture, signifying that the audience was over.

Dumbfounded and hopeful, if a bit annoyed, Optimus bid his farewell and left.

Despite Sentinel's benevolence Optimus had a lot to worry about. While remand prison's cells were more spacious and comfortable than those in the Stockades, they were still cells. There was no approximate estimation of how long Megatron's trial would take, and Optimus feared that confinement would cause ground sickness to appear anew. He couldn't allow that; not when the twins were accused of Decepticon-ish behavior. But there was a chance to catch Sentinel in a good mood and request for the twins to be released under condition that they will be closely monitored... For now Optimus could just sit back and hope for the best.

However, his hopes were crushed in a couple of days, when he went to visit the twins and bring them new games to entertain themselves. At the entrance to the detention complex he met Perceptor – the Head of the Ministry of Science. A group of his workers were moving in front of him, carrying some complex equipment.

Perceptor’s small emotionless optics fixed on Optimus's face, examining it like a lab sample.

“Good afternoon, Optimus Prime.”

“Um... Good afternoon, Perceptor.” Something clenched painfully in his abdomen. “What brings you here?”

“My studies. It is my duty as the chief developer of the Project Safeguard to inspect my creations' condition when something goes wrong. If the cause lies in our work, it is necessary that we take responsibility.”

No. No, no, please no!

“And... What have you discovered?” Somehow Optimus was able to keep himself from stuttering.

“A very troublesome thing, indeed; apparently, the Decepticon coding that we implanted has grown much more active with time. It is practically infecting the subjects, influencing their behavior down to the most basic programming. This malfunction seems to be the cause of the act of aggression they committed.”

“What does that mean for the twins?” Optimus balled his hands into fists to conceal his fingers' trembling.

Perceptor's voice or expression didn't change one iota.

“I need to perform a more thorough analysis, but my hypothesis so far is that Project Safeguard has failed. Our subjects received not only positive, but also negative traits of Decepticon coding. This was one of the risks that I warned Ultra Magnus about, and I've always recommended monitoring the subjects. Unfortunately, with the incapacitation of Ultra Magnus further observations were

cancelled by Acting Magnus Sentinel Prime. Currently our subjects have developed Decepticon-like behavioral patterns in different areas, which are battling old Autobot programming. You interacted with the twins a lot, Optimus Prime,” Perceptor made a short pause. “Have you, by any chance, noticed anything unusual?”

Optimus could be proud of himself. His vocalizer didn't even hitch when he said:

“No, nothing but normal youngling behavior.”

“I see.” Perceptor's face didn't betray what he thought of Optimus's answer.

“So, um... What are you going to do with that information?”

“I am going to write a report for Sentinel Magnus, naturally. Now if you excuse me,” Perceptor nodded to Optimus and passed by.

The Prime muttered a goodbye and resumed walking absent-mindedly. Only when the heavy door of the detention center shut after him did the full realization strike.

Optimus leaned on the wall, the passageway spinning before his sight. It happened. What he and Ratchet feared and desperately tried to avoid finally happened. The Ministry of Science got their hands on the information about the Jettwins' coding... Right when they were accused of murder. On Cybertron that was driven to madness with paranoia and hate of the Decepticons.

And from the moment when this information reaches Sentinel there will be no help or protection from his side.

Optimus hid his face in palms. Oh, he remembered – remembered how Sentinel had reacted when he saw Blackarachnia.

He claimed that Elita went offline long time ago. He didn't accept her as a Decepticon – or a “mutant freak”.

He won't accept Jetfire and Jetstorm as half-Decepticons. For Sentinel, they will be as good as dead.

Optimus wasn't mistaken in his presumptions. The twins' case, which was supposed to be postponed till after Megatron's trial, suddenly became the hot topic of the Council's meeting.

“Due to the Ministry of Science negligence we had two uncontrolled Decepticon hybrids in our midst!” Sentinel was fuming; all of his security measures were, apparently, in vain.

Perceptor, ever logical and levelheaded, blinked.

“We cancelled observation on your order, Sentinel Magnus.”

Despite the direness of the situation, Optimus couldn't help but smile a little: it looked like Sentinel's head was ready to start smoking.

“Well, it were you who did a lousy job in the first place!” he yelled.

Luckily, Alpha Trion intervened before it could escalate.

“Please, this is not the time and place for us to argue about who is guilty. We must decide what to

do with Jetfire and Jetstorm.”

Sentinel's face became blank – the same stony mien he wore when he was talking about Elita.

“I believe it is obvious: we lock them up in the Stockades.”

“In Trypticon,” Acting Head of Intelligence Cliffjumper corrected. “As Decepticons, they should be kept in Trypticon.”

“I object,” Perceptor stood up. “I request the subjects to be returned to the Ministry of Science. We must study the causes of Project Safeguard's failure in order to develop better ways of code implanting...”

At this moment Optimus decided that he had enough.

“Excuse me, but it's our comrades we are talking about.” His voice resonated loud and clear across the hall, and all Council members turned their heads in his direction. Optimus was acutely aware of how small and humble he appeared standing far below the sacred seats; he wasn't a member of this assembly, he was just an honorary guest – a title he earned by his victory. He had no right of vote in the government – but he could speak before them.

“Sentinel Magnus, honorable Council,” Optimus made sure to catch every mech's gaze as he looked over the hall. “I wish to draw your attention to the fact that Jetfire and Jetstorm were and still are loyal Autobots. Their programming caused them to commit murder – but this programming was installed into them without their consent. I don't suggest we forget about what they've done – we shouldn't, and justice must be served – but we must take responsibility for our own part in this crime. We created the Jettwins, we gave them Decepticon coding, and we mustn't forfeit our own soldiers.”

Sentinel frowned, Perceptor remained emotionless, but Alpha Trion actually regarded the young Prime with interest.

“Optimus Prime has a point,” the old mech stated, stroking his facial decorations. “The Jettwins are Autobots in everything but a part of their coding. I agree that they shouldn't be sent to Trypticon, but they definitely must face a trial where all details of their condition must be thoroughly examined.”

“Impossible,” Perceptor protested impassively. “The Jettwins' case contains classified information that can't be brought out of the Council chamber or the Ministry of Science. As our test subjects they are Ministry of Science's property and should be returned in order to avoid further incidents.”

“You speak of them like they're some tools!” Optimus knew he should control his emotions; all outbursts only made him appear childish in contrast to reasonable and collected Perceptor, but he simply wasn't able to keep his cool. “You can't just take them back like a broken datapad!”

“You don't understand it, Optimus,” Sentinel raised his chin, his pose emanating wisdom and condescension. “When you have the entire Autobot Commonwealth to protect, you have to make sacrifices. When a weapon breaks, it has to be discarded.”

“But they are not weapons!” Optimus clenched his fists, voice rising to the high ceiling of the ancient chamber. “They are living beings! Cybertronians! They deserve to be treated as such!”

And at the moment the last words escaped his mouth Alpha Trion's face changed. Optimus noticed it with a corner of an eye – and then it dawned upon him, just *what* he had just said.

“We are not weapons that the Autobots can discard when they don't need us anymore; we are living beings. We are Decepticons! And if they deny us what is rightfully ours – we shall take it!”

Megatron's voice, distant and marred by static, echoed in his mind. Most of the younger mechs, like Sentinel or Cliffjumper, never heard that speech which was hidden in the archives – but an old bot like Alpha Trion doubtlessly remembered it. While the Head of the ruling Council was on Optimus's side, there was hope, but now... The way Alpha Trion was looking at him sent a chill down Optimus's spine, yet his face was burning.

Without Alpha Trion's support the dispute ended quickly. Optimus lost.

Optimus spent the entire evening pacing in his room. Six steps to one wall, then six steps to the other; he didn't know how long a distance he walked as the thoughts were racing in his head, sharp and torturous.

Jetfire and Jetstorm were going to be sent to the Ministry of Science. They were not just some wayward flightframes; they were an unsuccessful experiment. Nobody would care for Decepticon murderers; they would end up on Perceptor's dissection table, dead if they're lucky, alive and conscious if they're not. This was why Blackarachnia was afraid to return to the Autobots; she knew what awaited a freak of nature like her. And for loyal, enthusiastic, trusting Jetfire and Jetstorm to meet such a fate...

Optimus stepped on his pride and begged Sentinel to reconsider, but to no avail. Sentinel didn't listen to him before, with Blackarachnia, he didn't listen now. The only thing Optimus managed to achieve was attracting suspicion to his own persona (which added to the damage done by his unconditional “quoting”, and by the Allspark how could he even say something like that?!). The twins *had* committed a crime; they murdered a citizen, a soldier. Optimus understood how it might look from an outside point of view: two failed experiment subjects, Decepticon hybrids, probably insane, attacked an Autobot and killed him. Their guilt was undeniable, and their danger to society obvious.

They deserved a punishment, they did... but not *such* a punishment. They didn't ask to be turned into flyers; they didn't even fully realize what had been done to them. They were just two young bots who honestly believed that they were serving the cause, but now they fell victim to the Autobots' never ending strife to prevail over the Decepticons and secure Cybertron once and for all.

They didn't deserve to be turned into test subjects for incredibly dangerous experiment, and they didn't deserve being disassembled for that.

Optimus punched the wall, repulsed by his own helplessness. He did all he could, but in the end he might've only made things worse. He was a failure of a mentor, failure of a protector. And now his wards will suffer for his mistakes.

He couldn't allow it. He couldn't!

Optimus stared at the cracks that ran through the wall where his fist smashed into its surface. This was all that was left for him: throw himself at the walls in fruitless frustration. Breaking things, like it could somehow break the twins out.

Break out.

Optimus's optics widened, and he rubbed his knuckles unconsciously. Words didn't help him; maybe it was time to use more primitive methods.

The ground-shattering crash that came from the farther side of the building was followed by the howling of the alarm. The Jettwins darted to the bars, trying to make out what was wrong, but a thick iron door separated their block from the rest of the detention center. They could see the night guard's backs disappear as he ran off, shouting something, but then another sound caught their attention: a clang from the passageway.

The ventilation shaft's cover fell to the floor; a hand with a gun appeared from the hole in the ceiling and shot the two cameras in the corners. Then the hand retreated, and the entirety of Optimus Prime descended on his grapple cord.

"Sir!" The twins gaped at him in wonder as Optimus deactivated the energy bars separating the cell from the passageway.

"Jetfire, Jetstorm, hurry!" The Prime pulled them into a short embrace. "We have very little time while everyone's distracted. Listen," he grabbed their shoulders and peered into their optics, making sure they saw how serious he was. "The Council has decided that you two are too dangerous, that your Decepticon coding makes you unstable. They are going to give you to Perceptor and his team to be studied and possibly deactivated. You need to get out of here, now."

"But..." The twins exchanged confused glances. "But Sentinel Magnus know we are loyal! He will tell them!"

The corner of Optimus's mouth twitched, but he managed to control himself. He didn't want to destroy the rest of the trust the twins had in their superiors. Didn't want to destroy that innocence they preserved.

"Sentinel was deceived by the Ministry of Science," he explained. "They persuaded him, and he doesn't know whom to believe. I'm sure one day he'll see the truth, but we have no time: they are going to process you tomorrow. You need to run, run and hide, at least until we have a chance to change Sentinel's mind." He took out a case from his subspace. "Here is a stock of energon, it'll support you for a while. Leave Cybertron, find some far-off planet with no Autobots around and stay there. Block your commlinks, so that you can't be tracked, and use the signal dampeners." Those they salvaged from the captive Decepticons – small devices invented by professor Sumdac, able to conceal energy signatures. The Elite Guard didn't hesitate to put them to use. "Just keep a low profile! ...well, at least as low as it's possible," he added with a twitch of his mouth. "Jettwins" and "low profile" didn't belong to the same sentence.

Jetfire and Jetstorm exchanged glances again and turned back to Optimus; this time there was something like an unsure plea on their faces, and Optimus felt he was on the verge of crying.

"Hurry!" He pushed the twins to the shaft. "It goes straight to the roof and is wide enough for you to fly."

"But the Space Bridge net is blocked..." Jetstorm grabbed Optimus's hand. "Sir, I don't understand..."

"You don't need the Space Bridge – or a spaceship. You can travel in space on your own." *Like Decepticons*, he almost said. "Combine into Safeguard and fly. Quickly!" Optimus embraced them again – for the last time. "Please, you have to. I won't forgive myself if something happens to

you.”

“O... Okay. Got it, sir,” Jetfire put his hand on his brother’s arm, urging him to follow. “But won’t you get in trouble for this?”

Optimus forced his lips into a crooked smile.

“Nobody saw it was me, right? I disabled the cameras. Go, please, now!” They couldn’t possibly have much time left before the panic caused by Optimus’s carefully placed explosions ceased.

“Yes, sir.” Jetfire activated his thrusters, rising over the floor slowly. “Goodbye, sir.” He nodded to Jetstorm – and in the next instance Optimus yelped as the blue twin’s arms wrapped around his middle, lifting him off the ground.

“I drop you in the vents, so you escape freely,” Jetstorm spoke over his audial. “Hold on, sir... And goodbye.”

They disappeared in the shaft a klik before the guards stormed into the empty cell block.

“This is unbelievable!” Sentinel smashed his hands against the tabletop of his office desk. “Such an audacious escape!”

“Yeah... Unbelievable,” Optimus agreed. He was afraid that his voice betrayed his uneasiness; he wasn’t used to blatantly lying to his superior officer... to his friend. Especially since he did feel guilty: he might’ve saved his wards, but he also helped two convicts flee from justice.

“I wonder who might’ve helped them,” Sentinel hissed, leaning over his table, blue optics glowing so intensely like they were trying to drill holes in Optimus’s plating.

“The Decepticons?” the Prime suggested as innocently as he could. Sentinel didn’t have any clues that pointed at Optimus... did he?

But even if he did, it didn’t change anything. Regardless of how he felt, Optimus was still confident that his decision was right. If the law enforcers find evidence, then let them condemn him. Optimus was ready to answer for his actions... but he won’t be jumping into the enforcers’ hands on his own.

Ratchet would probably grin and say that he’d matured. Before Earth Optimus would’ve been repulsed by the mere idea of not confessing his guilt; now, however... Maybe fighting Decepticons taught him one important thing: that the longer you survive and stay in fight – the longer you can make a difference.

And Optimus faced his friend without hesitation.

“Riiiiight, because breaking two Autobots out of jail is more important to the ‘cons than breaking their fraggin’ *leader* out. I warn you, Optimus,” Sentinel narrowed his optics. “Don’t you dare play with me. Your... fascination with the ‘cons might raise some questions, and you do have a fellow Autobot’s murder in your personal file.”

Alright, that was too much.

“I didn’t murder Elita, Sentinel, no matter what you like to tell yourself.” Optimus gritted his dental plates but didn’t look away.

Sentinel's EM field flared with aggression.

"Now listen here, Optimus, *old friend*," he hissed, distinguishing every word. "You may think that you are some sort of a hero, and the public seems to think the same. But *I* know better. I know you well, *pal*, and I'm watching you. If I get a teeny-weeny suspicion that you betrayed us and jeopardized the Autobot cause again... I will not be as soft as Ultra Magnus. Is that understood?"

Somehow it didn't even hurt that much. Optimus nodded, his spark cold and numb.

"Understood. May I go, Sentinel Magnus, sir?"

Sentinel scrutinized him for a klik more, but then inclined his head.

"Yes. Dismissed."

As Optimus was leaving Sentinel's office, he had a fleeting thought that things couldn't probably turn any worse.

He was wrong.

The news hit Cybertron the next day.

Apparently, the Quintesson delegation was not a delegation, but a battle fleet. It surrounded a peripheral Autobot colony of Paradron, threatening to destroy the planet in case their demands weren't fulfilled. But it was the nature of those demands that made every Cybertronian's jaw drop.

"Megatron of the Decepticons and Optimus Prime of the Autobots must be handed over, so that they can be tried and executed for the crimes against the Quintesson Pan-Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere."

On every street, in every house Autobots were discussing what in the Pits it could mean. It was one thing to demand Megatron's extradition – the mech was a monster, there was little wonder in the fact that he wronged the Quintessons somehow – but Optimus Prime? The young hero of Cybertron? What could he possibly have done to cause such a reaction? Theories were popping up like corrosion spots after an acid rain, but the truth was that Optimus himself had no answer to this question.

"I've never even seen a real Quintesson!" he exclaimed as he stood before the Council once again. "I have no idea why they are upset with me!"

"Just like our Intelligence Service has no idea how a freakin' *battle fleet* managed to pass for a peaceful delegation," one of the Council members spat, casting venomous glances at Cliffjumper.

"The most important thing is what we do with their demands," Alpha Trion interfered. "They took an entire planet hostage. How do we respond?"

"We don't respond!" Sentinel snapped. "We don't hold negotiations with treacherous rustbuckets. This will only make us appear weak."

The Quintessons, however, weren't happy with Sentinel's position. They didn't offer to negotiate, though; they simply blew up Paradron with all its inhabitants.

This had an impact. Cybertron immersed in mourning – but the Autobots weren't even given

proper time to mourn. The Quintesson battle fleet, only slightly hindered by the Autobot forces, moved deeper into the Commonwealth's space – until they had their cannons aimed at the colony of Micro Zone. Next on the way were the heavily populated worlds of Animatron and Velocitron.

Fear turned into terror and rage. Demonstrations broke out all around Cybertron and the colonies. Some were screaming that the Elite Guard needed to hit the Quintessons hard and teach them a lesson they wouldn't forget; others begged for a peaceful solution.

Nobody supported the idea of entire worlds as "necessary sacrifices" for the sake of pride.

"We can't go back on our words," Sentinel tried to keep his composure, but it was obvious that he was close to panic. "We can't appear weak."

"But we are weak, Sentinel Magnus," Alpha Trion retorted. "Our troops are busy deflecting attacking Decepticons, who grew impudent after they heard of our troubles. We cannot fight a war in two theaters."

"We tried explaining to them that we can't hand over Megatron without the Galactic Council approval. Megatron will be judged and most likely executed, and if they want to witness it, they're welcome. But they answered by simply repeating the same message," Cliffjumper pressed a button, and the holographic letters appeared in the air in the middle of the chamber: *"Megatron of the Decepticons and Optimus Prime of the Autobots must be handed over, so that they can be tried and executed for the crimes against the Quintesson Pan-Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere."*

"They threaten to destroy Micro Zone just as they destroyed Paradron. We can't lose more innocent lives – but if it does happen, we will also lose our people's support. What do we do, Magnus?" Alpha Trion fixed his gaze at Sentinel.

For the first time in his life Sentinel looked unhappy with the title.

"I..." He gulped, expression hunted and unsure. "I need to think. Why would they even ask for something like this?! Why now? It's stupid!"

"On the contrary, it seems rather reasonable," Perceptor remarked. "It is obvious that the Quintessons attempt to weaken both Decepticons and Autobots by, figuratively speaking, removing the heads of both factions."

Alpha Trion moaned quietly and covered his face, but it was too late: Sentinel's optics narrowed dangerously.

"'Removing the heads'? And how, may I ask, would the death of Optimus Prime remove the head of the Autobot faction?"

Perceptor opened his mouth, and Alpha Trion wished he could gag him, but Sentinel wasn't going to listen anyway.

"I am the leader of the Autobot faction! I am the Magnus of Cybertron! The loss of one Prime, famous he might be, is too insignificant to seriously impair the Autobot Cause!"

Alpha Trion sighed and shook his head as his assistant patted his shoulder in an awkward attempt to console him. The old mech wanted to strangle Perceptor right now, but the damage had already been done.

Optimus wasn't present at that fateful Council session; he was deemed unsuitable due to his involvement in the ultimatum (and due to Sentinel's general mistrust), so he learned of the results from Jazz.

The Council decided to satisfy the Quintessons' demands.

"Screw Megatron; if they want him so much, they can have him," Sentinel spat when Optimus burst into his office, ignoring the initial refusal of an audience. "I don't really care how the bastard dies, and to the Pits with Galactic Council."

He obstinately avoided meeting Optimus's optics.

The pause grew longer, until the silence was so thick it practically had an EM field of its own.

Sentinel's patience ran out first.

"What do you want of me, Optimus?!" He yelled, rising to his feet and throwing his datapad to the wall. "Do you want me to condemn Micro Zone too?! Or fight the Quints?! We tried! I don't know what they have on those ships, but they scattered our forces like cheap toys! And we don't have a fleet of Omega Sentinels, our army is fighting our true enemies – the Decepticons. What was I supposed to do?! I'm sorry, old friend, but if I can pay with one Autobot's life for safety of our colonies, I will fraggin' do it! Consider that an order from your Magnus."

He was right, of course. Sentinel was right. In fact, if Optimus didn't get the order, he'd probably volunteer; he couldn't look into other Autobots' faces knowing that many Cybertronians were paying with their deaths for him to continue living. This was his duty.

Then why did he feel so betrayed?

"At least let me call my friends and say goodbye," he said quietly.

"No."

"No?" Optimus raised his head, staring at Sentinel in shock, but the Magnus's face was harsh.

"Write them letters, if you wish, but no calls. I'm not having your crazy insubordinate friends throwing a tantrum and snatching you away in the last minute. You guys need to be kept as far away from each other as possible; maybe then you can be taught discipline."

"You..." Optimus made a step back. "*You* did it! You sent them away on purpose! To leave me here alone!"

"This is beside the point. *I am not having another escape like with the Jettwins!*" Sentinel barked, his anger exploding around him in a flash of his field, but then his voice lowered again, turning sinister. "Listen here, Optimus. If you try acting up – rally the people or something – I will make sure that every slagging yellow newspaper learns of your little romantic visits to Megatron – and of your connection to the Jettwins. You will never clean your name after that. I'm giving you an opportunity to die as a hero – or you'll be remembered as a traitor and die as a Decepticon sympathizer. So, Optimus? What do you choose?"

Optimus closed his optics, rage tearing his spark inside out but somehow never breaking past its tight confinement.

"Fine," he muttered, voice hollow and detached. "I'll do it."

It wasn't that much of a choice, really.

Hadeen shone brightly over the landing field of the spaceport, glints of reflected light making the metal plateau almost painful to look at with normal settings. Yet Optimus refused to tune his visual receptors' sensitivity down; if it was the last time he saw Cybertron, he wanted to take in as much as he could.

It was hard to believe that he was going to his death. Destroyed Paradron, besieged Micro Zone, Quintessons with their inexplicable ultimatum – all of this seemed unreal... Or rather, would seem unreal, if not for a strange spiral shaped shuttle that was waiting on the landing field. A Quintesson shuttle that would take him to his fate.

Nobody had exited the shuttle, and the small crowd consisted only of the Autobots, all optics trained on the alien vessel. Well, Autobots and one Decepticon.

Megatron was in stasis cuffs and barely able to walk, in contrast to Optimus who had simple metal bands around his wrists, meant to shock him only if he tried to break them. Optimus was surprised to see that Megatron had finally been properly treated by the medics: his armor was repaired, dents and gashes disappeared. Apparently, the Council wanted him to look presentable for his executioners.

"Hello, Optimus Prime," the warlord murmured as they were positioned side by side. "I'm pleased to see you again, although the circumstances are... baffling."

"To put it mildly," Optimus's voice squeaked into a hysterical giggle, and he preferred to shut his mouth.

Without a prompt the shuttle's hatch opened, but nothing could be seen inside except for utter darkness.

"Go," the Elite Guard soldier behind them ordered. Another one pushed a rifle's barrel at Megatron's back; the Decepticon sneered, but started walking.

Optimus considered turning around and casting one last glance at the spaceport and the people gathered there – at Jazz, at Cliffjumper... But Sentinel was there too, and Optimus discovered that he couldn't look at his friend right now. He ex-vented shortly and followed Megatron up the gangway and into the black maw of the shuttle.

The hatch began closing the moment he was inside, but before Optimus could readjust his optic sensors something touched his chest, blue electric bolts bit into his frame – and he didn't even get to feel the pain as his processor shut down.

Chapter End Notes

What a twist! 8D

Part II, Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Warning for this chapter: forced feeding.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part II. How to Visit an Alien Planet and Survive

Chapter 1.

Optimus came to his senses in absolute darkness. The only source of light was the natural glow of his optics, which allowed him to make out the bare walls of a small chamber. His first attempt to move proved that he had stasis cuffs on, tuned to paralyse everything but facial expressions and basic automatic processes.

The way Optimus was bound seemed strange, though: he was sitting on the floor with a pillar supporting his back, and his bound arms were hooked around...

Around what appeared to be Megatron's arms, judging by the steady pulse of the warlord's EM field.

Optimus's vocalizer creaked, and the Prime would've jumped to his feet if he could. There was a low rumble behind him, and the vibration of Megatron's frame resonated in Optimus's own.

"I see that you've awoken," the warlord said, his voice a little distorted.

Optimus forfeited his fruitless attempts to move away and drew his field tight to his plating in desperate attempt to protect his personal space.

"I must confess that Quintesson taste in accommodations is quite unusual."

Optimus gritted his dental plates, horribly, unbearably aware of Megatron's presence so close to him; their arms were intertwined, shackles binding them to the pillar and to each other. Stasis cuffs might have prevented any further touch, but they couldn't prevent the warmth seeping between two mechs' bodies.

"Would you answer me or would you prefer to stay mute till the end of our trip?"

"What do you want?!" Optimus snapped, his smaller engine roaring to life.

Megatron paused.

"We seem to be bound together – both figuratively and very much literally – so I believe we should at least evaluate our situation and consider our possibilities. Do you have any idea why they might be after your head?"

Somehow this sensible, strictly business approach calmed Optimus down. Yes; treat it like a military operation. Imagine you're still on Earth. What would you do?

Optimus made a deep slow vent, forcing his panicking systems into acceptable working condition, and opened his optics he never realized he had shut.

“No. I've never met any Quintessons and never took part in any matters involving them. You?”

Megatron hummed in thought.

“My soldiers were hired by Quintessons' enemies from time to time, but then they were also hired by Quintessons themselves. Mostly insignificant operations, though, and I've never had a direct confrontation with them. No, I don't know why they might have a vendetta against me.”

“They asked for both of us; maybe they don't like Cybertronians in general?”

“That's a possibility, but remember: they mentioned some crimes they wanted to punish us for. This is what puzzles me.”

“What puzzles *me* is why they had to transport us like this!” Despite Optimus's best efforts to keep emotions in check his voice broke into a shrill exclamation.

Megatron chuckled, but it came out stilted rather than cheerful.

“Yeah, most peculiar.” Another klik of uncomfortable silence. “I begin to think that Earthlings had a point with their bizarre superstitions regarding aliens. This might be not the exhaust port probing, but it's just as ridiculous.”

Optimus's jaw slacked as he assessed this unexpected phrasing, and then he burst into a nervous laughter.

“I suppose you meant 'anal probing', and I can't believe you are aware of this term.”

“I spent quite a lot of time helpless and crippled, plugged into Professor Sumdac's primitive tech that he reverse-engineered from *my* body.” Even without seeing Megatron's face Optimus could imagine the spiteful sneer on his lips. “So yes, I had the misfortune of acquainting myself with human Internet.”

Optimus had a couple of venomous comments to offer, but held his tongue. There was no sense in squabbling with Megatron, now that they were prisoners of the Quintessons and were going to spend some time together.

“Do you think they are watching us?” He inquired after a while. The comparison to perverted aliens from Earth folklore seemed funny at first, but with Megatron's huge frame radiating heat behind him and Optimus's EM field rudely invaded by Megatron's wider one the young Prime was beginning to worry. What did the Quintessons want with them? Surely they weren't planning on... experimenting with Cybertronian interpersonal relations. Right?

“Who knows? But I won't be surprised if they do.”

The dark chamber filled with silence again.

They didn't really speak much after that. Megatron wasn't very talkative when Optimus didn't wield any power that could be useful, the Prime thought bitterly. Shows how much of his interest was genuine. And you bought it, you naïve fool.

On the other hand, perhaps Megatron simply didn't want to give the Quintesson any information they might seek.

Three solar cycles passed in idleness, with Optimus's fuel levels slowly but steadily going down. Despite most of their systems being disabled by the stasis cuffs, their frames still required energon to function, and the less fuel was left, the more Optimus's distress grew. There was a positive thing, too: with time the stasis cuffs' effects waned, and now Optimus could actually move around a little. Not that he wanted to; when he first tried to shift his arms rubbed against Megatron's. Optimus was more or less used to touching, but this awoke some unwanted memories... No. It was better to remain motionless.

When red warnings about dangerous lack of fuel began appearing on his HUD something finally happened: a hatch opened in the wall, and a strange round drone flew into the cell. Dim sickeningly green light from the outside was almost blinding to Optimus's sensitized optics, but he still welcomed it: at least it brought some change. The drone, however, made his battle protocols activate. Were the Quints finally going to experiment on them..?

The drone stopped between their heads, and a segmented black tube extended from the ball's metal body, its end fixed before Optimus's face. The Prime moved away instinctively, but then he noticed a drop of energon glistening on the tube's end.

"I... I think we are being fed?" For the first time Optimus regretted he couldn't turn his head to look at Megatron. "Do you think it's poisoned?"

"No idea," Megatron sounded strained. His field betrayed an inscrutable mixture of negative emotions that Optimus couldn't quite decipher, but clearly sensed. Them being so close worked for both sides, after all: Megatron, too, couldn't hide from him.

"I'll try it," Optimus decided out loud. "I don't know what is worse – being poisoned or falling into stasis in Quintessons' captivity." Then he opened his mouth and caught the energon drop with his glossa.

It tasted weird – Optimus wasn't familiar with this type of energon – but his chemical analyzers didn't find anything suspicious.

"It seems to be fine," he said, contemplating the tube with more interest, but Megatron's EM field flared with anger.

"I am not going to be fed like some – mmmph!"

Optimus didn't even need to guess what interrupted the warlord, because the same happened to him: the tube extended again and drove into his mouth forcefully. Optimus jerked his head and squirmed, but the drone didn't care for his objections: the tube pushed deeper and deeper until it was seated inside his intake – and only then did the energon flow out of it. Optimus thrashed around in his bindings as much as his cuffs allowed, trying to cough but failing, his throat calipers constricting around the intrusion. His fuel tanks growled in satisfaction of being filled, but everything in his mind protested; this was humiliating, this was depersonalizing and degrading and...

His own shame and indignation were overtaken by the storm of sheer *fury* that was raging around Megatron. Optimus gladly lost himself in that whirlwind; this time he didn't want to oppose Megatron. This time he *wanted* to agree with the Decepticon, and, while Optimus wasn't capable

of such wrath, for the moment he allowed himself to ride on this wave.

The worst thing was that he wasn't in control of his body anymore. His fuel levels were quickly increasing until they reached the green zone, then the maximum... For a klik Optimus was afraid that the drone wouldn't stop, and energon would be pumped into him until his tanks cracked and bursted. But, fortunately, this wasn't the case: at last the flow stopped and the tube retracted – a repulsive slick feeling that left Optimus coughing, gurgling and desperately trying not to puke all over the floor. The only thing that helped him was the thought that if he purged his tanks now, he'd be sentenced to another feeding session.

Megatron behind him was coughing too; Optimus felt his massive frame shaking slightly, from which emotion he couldn't tell.

"I will kill them," Megatron hissed, voice hoarse. "*I will kill them all.*"

Perhaps Optimus should've said something about the value of every life and the necessity of proper legal proceedings, but right now he wasn't in the mood. Thin dribbles of unusually viscous energon mixed with his oral lubricants were staining his chin, and he couldn't even wipe them off. Disgusting.

The drone headed to the exit, obviously done with its business, but before the hatch closed again, blocking all sources of external light, Megatron cursed under his breath.

"Frag those bastards! Not locks again!"

"What?" once more Optimus regretted that he was unable to turn his head.

"They put flight locks on me! I saw them on my legs." Now Megatron was positively livid... and there was also something else, carefully hidden behind the torrent of anger in his field. Optimus didn't quite understand what exactly made Megatron so upset, but, to be frank, he wasn't in the right condition to care. The other's EM field overlapping with his own wasn't welcome anymore; Optimus had his hands full with his own troubles to deal with the Decepticon's tantrums.

"It's not that it makes a difference," he barked. "You're not flying anywhere anyway."

"So aren't you, *Autobot*," Megatron practically *spat* this word. "What, how does it feel, to be betrayed by your own people that you wished to protect so desperately? Or by that Magnus of yours? I believe you called him your *friend*."

Optimus growled, a sound born deep in his chest. Long days of silence and grim pondering took their toll: he was sick of this journey and of his company, and Optimus's carefully managed self-control finally broke.

"Shut *up*!" he snarled. "You know nothing about the Autobots – or about things like duty and honor! I do what I do not because I want praise or power, but because this is right! A Decepticon like you will never understand it! All you care about are yourselves."

Megatron snorted loudly.

"Of course! 'We all are cogs in the great Autobot machine'," he quoted in mockery. "Maybe you are happy to be a faceless little cog, but I refuse to become one. We are more than that!"

"What's so bad about being a part of the team?" Optimus straightened his back, attempting to push against Megatron's frame. "Do you know why we always defeated you big strong Decepticons? It's because we work together!"

Megatron laughed.

“Oh, how sweet! Such a dutiful, idealistic young officer! Sorry to disappoint you, *Autobot*, but your superiors don't want you to be a part of the team; what they want is a cog – hard-working, obedient and expendable. Which you are, congratulations. A perfect Autobot indeed.”

“Like you would know what my superiors think,” Optimus retorted, although he couldn't deny that Megatron's words left a stinging mark on his spark.

The warlord made a short derisive sound.

“As if I need it. Just look at your traditions! You Autobots receive names when you are already adults and demonstrated your use to the society. Who names you? Your superiors. How do they name you? According to their impression of you. We Decepticons choose our names ourselves.”

This tirade was filled with such arrogance that Optimus couldn't resist making a jab.

“Says much about you! What kind of name is ‘Megatron’? It doesn't even mean anything, it's just a combination of sounds a newspark would find cool.”

“It's *mythological*, you uneducated glitch!” Wow, Optimus really seemed to have gotten on the warlord's nerves. “I took my name after Megatronus, the great hero of old who vanquished the Enemies From Beyond the Sky with his Requiem Blaster.”

“Shows who's uneducated,” it was Optimus's turn to lift his chin arrogantly. “I've never heard of a hero named Megatronus. You Decepticons must've made him up to stroke your ego. Every sparkling on Cybertron knows that Enemies From Beyond the Sky were defeated by Prima, the ancestor of all Autobots, and his mighty Star Saber.”

“Oh please, I heard that stupid Autobot propaganda masked as a ‘legend’. A groundpounder defeated space invaders with a *sword*? That's absurd.”

“Well, that's a legendary weapon,” Optimus objected with slightly less vigor. “It was described as ‘the sword that pierced the sky’.”

“Riiiiiight,” Megatron drawled, but didn't add anything. Perhaps he considered it below himself to argue with a foolish little Autobot.

Optimus fell into silence too. Their quarrel was pointless, to be honest; here they were, transported like some cattle, heading to their doom, and all they did was bickering or ignoring each other. It seemed like a terrible waste of time... But what else *could* they do?

Their meetings in the Trypticon prison felt so far away. Almost like they happened in another life.

“Hey,” Optimus called hesitantly. “Megatron. I... I wanted to say that, no matter what happened during the Great War and on Earth and, um... later, I have always held the deepest respect for you. Didn't like you at all, but respected.”

He finished this confession and bit his lip, already cursing himself for spilling all these stupid mushy nonsense. Megatron would definitely laugh at him, Pits, he *should* laugh at him! Optimus was just blabbering because of the situation and...

“Come on, don't bury us preemptively.” To Optimus's surprise, Megatron's tone was good-natured and almost humorous – like he was smiling. “I had Starscream aiming at my bodiless head, and I outlived him. There are no hopeless situations; the fact that we can't do anything right now doesn't

mean we won't have any chances in the future."

All of this was so unexpected that Optimus just sat there, unsure how to reply. After the pause lasted for a while, he figured out that he'd better not reply at all for it not to look awkward.

However, Megatron wasn't finished.

"But when it comes to our battles, I'm glad I got to have you as a foe. A worthy opponent is a rare treasure and I appreciate that."

Once again Optimus was left speechless, but this time it was more of a conscious decision.

This way it was easier to ignore the warmth that was born somewhere in his spark and rolled through his body in tender waves.

Their journey ended as abruptly as it started. The faint rumble of the ship's engine stopped, and in a few clicks the hatch in the wall opened again, making way for the round form of the service drone. Only this time instead of feeding it put shockers to their necks and shut their processors down again.

When Optimus woke up, he found himself lying on the cold metal floor of another chamber. This one, however, looked more like a real cell: dim light fell on piles of rags in the corner and some components scattered around the floor. The air reeked, smells of oil and curdled lubricants mixed with indescribable stench of organic origin. Energy bars separated Optimus's cell from the similar one to his right, and when the young Prime turned his head he met the stare of familiar red optics.

"Hello, Optimus Prime," Megatron said. He stood in the middle of his cell, head almost reaching the ceiling.

"Yeah... Hello." Optimus rose to his feet. He was still in stasis cuffs, but the current was much weaker now, allowing him to move, if sluggishly. The fact that his hands were bound in front of him was another improvement.

"How long have we been here?" Optimus flexed, warming up his stiff joints.

"No idea." Megatron shrugged, and his shackles clanged. "I've just woken up." Optimus noticed two small devices attached to the sides of the warlord's calves; those had to be the flight locks he mentioned earlier.

They didn't get the chance to continue their conversation. The heavy iron doors to their cells opened with a screech, and Optimus finally saw his captors for the first time.

The guards were large, bulky humanoids with green skin and long sharp-teethed snouts; their rather squishy looking bodies were covered by spiky armor. According to Optimus's old books, they belonged to one of the lower breeds off Quintessons: the Bailiffs.

Without saying a word the guards pushed Optimus and Megatron out of their cells and escorted them through the numerous passages and stairs. Optimus supposed they were heading to the court room, but, much to his astonishment, the final grand gate led them outside.

Faint haze covered the feverishly yellow sky, dispersing the light of the planet's star. In front of the entrance to the cell block there was an enormous hole in the ground, its edges clad in carved metal. A narrow plank was built over the abyss like an unfinished bridge, and from the foundation of the

plank wide steps began, leading higher and higher. And there, up on a terrace overlooking the entire complex, Optimus saw them: three members of the highest caste of Quintesson society – the Judges.

What they resembled the most were three rotten eggs. Greenish-grey lumps of flesh were hovering over the ground on repulsors, thin tendrils hanging from the underside, and five faces were placed around the body, rotating according to the Quintesson's thoughts. To be honest, they seemed like decorative masks more than real faces.

On the steps below them stood (or rather, floated) another Quintesson that Optimus identified as the Inquisitor. He had only one face, and his much thicker tentacles were raised in a grand gesture.

“Your Imperial Majesties, the accused have arrived!”

The Bailiffs took Optimus and Megatron to the plank and forced them to walk to its end. Now Optimus had a chance to look down, and what he saw made him bite his lip in repressed panic. The bottom of the bit was teeming with scraplets. These small round-shaped pests were wiped out from the face of Cybertron, but still existed in plenty in the depths of space and on less civilized robotic planets. A swarm of scraplets could devour a mech in mere seconds, and instinctive fear of them was ingrained in all Cybertronians; Optimus could feel how Megatron tensed beside him, his armor drawn tight to his body.

“Let the trial begin!” the Inquisitor proclaimed. “Optimus Prime of the Autobots, Megatron of the Decepticons, you are hereby accused of the crimes against the Quintesson Pan-Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere and are going to be punished accordingly.”

“Before that I would like to know what crimes we committed,” Megatron's booming voice filled the strange open-air court room, reflected off the metal surfaces.

The three Judges' faces began switching; Optimus guessed it could mean confusion. Or maybe not.

“You did not commit any crimes,” the Judge in the center answered at last, his tone impassive. “You will be punished for the misdeeds of your predecessors. Defying the Quintesson Pan-Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere and robbing the Quintesson people of what is rightfully ours is a grave offence.”

Optimus couldn't take it anymore. He expected to see at least a semblance of justice, but this...

“Are you saying that we are prosecuted for something we didn't do?!” He stepped forward, feeling perhaps not as tall as Megatron, but just as proud, his every servo rigid and trembling like a string.

The Judges rotated their faces for some more in a wordless dispute.

“The accused's opinion does not matter. Punishment is inevitable.”

“So we don't even get to defend ourselves? What kind of trial is this?!” Optimus was shaking now, his optics flashing almost white. He wasn't even truly afraid; he was outraged and *insulted*. Being snatched from his homeworld all of a sudden, bought with the hundreds of deaths and a destroyed world, carried across half of the galaxy – and all for this *farce*?

The Inquisitor clasped his tentacles.

“Defence is unnecessary. Justice must be served.”

“This is insanity!”

“Don't waste your time,” Megatron muttered through clenched dental plates. “They can't be reasoned with.”

The Inquisitor turned to the Judges and pointed his appendages in their prisoners' direction.

“Your Imperial Majesties, what is your verdict? Guilty or innocent?”

Another round of the face switching passed, until finally the central Judge declared:

“Innocent.”

And the plank under Optimus and Megatron's feet dropped.

Chapter End Notes

I mixed up my files and accidentally overwrote the one with the chapter, losing the entire second half of it. Had to write it again.

I was so fucking pissed.

Part II, Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

What saved both Optimus and Megatron was the instinctive reaction: as they raised their hands to protect their faces, hungry scraplets attacked the stasis cuffs in attempt to reach the thin tender metal that lay beyond. The shackles cracked under razor sharp teeth, and Optimus felt the full strength return to his body. His senses were overflowed with pain from dozens of wounds, mind was clouded by mortal fear, but over the swarming mass of scraplets he noticed a small ledge on the farther wall of the pit. It flashed on his HUD among the panicked signals from all systems; Optimus raised his arm, already covered in scraplets, and shot his grappling hook.

He didn't remember how he managed to reach that ledge and climb it in time; perhaps he just really, really wanted to live. All he knew was that he somehow found himself sharing the relative safety of the small terrace with Megatron (who, apparently, had the same idea). And only then did Optimus realize that stray scraplets were still gnawing at his armor. With a constricted scream he began tearing them off, accompanied by muffled curses of Megatron, who was busy with cleaning his own frame.

When the last scraplets were thrown into the pit, Optimus was finally able to arrange his thoughts into some sort of order. He leaned on the wall, terror of the last klik still echoing in his spark, and exchanged glances with Megatron. The warlord appeared pretty battered, his thick grey plating full of cuts and holes, some parts bitten off completely. Optimus supposed he wasn't in better shape himself. In fact, they both probably looked pathetic, perched on the narrow ledge that barely had enough space to accommodate them.

Stricken by a sudden question, Optimus threw his head back, wondering if the Quintessons were upset with their captives escaping certain death. However, the Judges didn't look fazed; they simply moved their seats closer to the railings and were observing the pit, tentacles waving slightly.

"Why aren't they trying to push us back?" Optimus mused out loud.

"Maybe they want fate to decide whether we live or die," Megatron grumbled. "With Quintesson logic you never know. Can your grappling hook reach the edge?"

Optimus wordlessly aimed and shot his grappling hook. It did reach the edge, but the cord was immediately cut by a blaster shot from one of the Bailiffs.

"It would seem they don't intend to leave it to fate," Optimus traced the remnant of the cord.

"Maybe they just want to see us fall into despair or push each other into the pit. I hope we won't be giving them this pleasure?" he asked cautiously, suddenly remembering just who his companion was.

The corner of Megatron's mouth twitched.

"No. If the squids want a dramatic performance, they aren't getting it."

"Good to know." Optimus touched the wall, then hit it – but his blow left no impact. The unfamiliar stone the wall was composed of was smooth and hard, impossible to climb or break in order to make an improvised ladder. "They definitely didn't build this little ledge for nothing. I bet

they love watching their victims starve or go crazy from fear.” When Megatron didn't answer, Optimus turned to him.

The warlord was examining the flight locks on his calves, and his expression wasn't very encouraging.

“If only I could get rid of them,” Megatron muttered.

“Can't you?”

“It's a long and tedious process. These devices are wired deep into the inner circuitry,” Megatron showed him thick armored cords disappearing under his plating. “If I try to disable the locks, the Quints will notice and most likely disable me instead.”

“So we are out of options?” Optimus dropped on the ledge and wrapped his arms around his knees. The scraplets were raging below them, trying to climb the stone wall but failing; their sharp rotating teeth were making a dazzling sight.

“We have time to think of something, at least until the Judges get tired of waiting.” Megatron tried to keep a calm facade, but Optimus could feel the turmoil in his field. They weren't bound together like before, but the tiny ledge pressed them into each other better than any bindings. For a brief moment Optimus wondered why Megatron didn't push him to the scraplets, but then perhaps the warlord needed a scraplet bait for later, when he'd come up with a plan.

Optimus had to make the Decepticon talk to him. To distract him from possibly devious ideas and create a common escape plan that would involve Optimus's survival. The problem was that their conversations would be heard by their Quintesson audience...

And then Optimus recalled something important.

He opened his comm line and hailed a certain frequency. For a few moments he was receiving only white noise, but finally there was a click, and access was granted.

[Megatron?]

To the warlord's credit, his expression never changed.

[How in the world did you get this frequency?] Megatron's personal comm line was well-protected by many layers of security codes that Autobot hackers couldn't crack, but Optimus, as always, found an unconventional solution: he simply asked for permission.

[It was in your files. I figured that this way the Quints wouldn't hear us planning. Um... you don't mind?] he added belatedly.

[I gave you access, didn't I?] Megatron didn't sound happy about this fact, but his EM field rippled with interest. [Good thinking, Autobot.]

Optimus suppressed the involuntary flutter of his spark at the praise.

[So, do you have any ideas?]

[As a matter of fact, I do.] Optimus barely managed not to turn around in surprise. Megatron gave him time to collect himself and then continued: [But it would require your help. I hope you have decent acting skills.]

[Depends on what role I have to play,] Optimus answered carefully.

And Megatron explained.

[Absolutely not!]

[Calm down, Autobot.]

[This is suicide!]

[Not for you. All you need is to play your part.]

[It... It doesn't matter!] Optimus bit his lips. [These are scraplets! Nobody deserves such a death!]

[I don't intend to die. Or do you have better ideas?]

[No,] Optimus had to admit. [But this... And how do I know you won't fly off and leave me here?] He inquired, suddenly suspicious. [Never took you for the self-sacrificing type.]

[Like I said, I don't intend to sacrifice myself. As for your question, I believe it is obvious that after our escape I will need your assistance.]

Optimus stared at the grey surface of the ledge between his feet. It was true that he didn't have any ideas to counter Megatron's with, and he was afraid that the Quintessons might get bored soon and force them into the pit or something. Besides, there was really no reason to worry about Megatron. He was the Decepticon leader; he didn't deserve compassion or concern... Although Optimus sported a tendency of offering him both. But the situations were different; earlier Megatron was a helpless prisoner, he was in the position of need, and Optimus was in his right to show mercy. Now, however, it was more like back on Earth: both of them were battling for survival on an alien planet, and all alliances were tentative and short-lived.

But it wasn't the right time to ponder about their previous encounters. Megatron suggested this plan himself. And they didn't have other options.

[Fine,] Optimus replied at last. [Let's do it.]

They started slowly – a bump into each other during clumsy attempts to change pose, a snarl and a snide remark in response to a muttered curse, all discussed and corrected via the commlink. Finally, when they decided that the tension was built up enough, the time came for the final act: Optimus sighed and squirmed, trying to look around for the tenth time in futile attempts to “find a way out”, then his foot slipped and he almost fell on Megatron.

“Oh for spark's sake, will you sit still?!” Megatron spun around, grabbed Optimus's neck and slammed him into the wall. “Do you want to fall to the scraplets, Autobot? I can throw you in there, if you're so impatient!”

“Let go of me!” Optimus hissed, clutching at Megatron's fingers. “Decepticon filth! It is your fault that we're here!”

[Good job,] Megatron said over the commlink as he leaned closer to Optimus's face.

“And how exactly is it my fault? I believe it was your foolish Autobot High Command that sent us

away like a package. You *and* me, Autobot!”

“Don't you dare talk about them in such tone!” Optimus shouted. [I'm gonna shoot the foam, prepare yourself,] he warned and activated his fire suppression system. A spurt of foam landed on Megatron's face before the warlord let go of him. Optimus gave him just enough time to brush the foam off before he kicked Megatron in the knee; the Decepticon lost his balance (quite naturally) – and fell from the too-small ledge.

Or rather, almost fell, since he managed to grab at the edge. Now he was hanging over the pit, and his legs were knee-deep in the swarm of scraplets, who instantly attacked their prey.

“Aaaaargh!!!” Megatron cringed from pain that was not an act. Optimus gulped, but it was not the time to falter; instead he squatted next to the fallen warlord and put on the nastiest smirk he could.

“Well, well, well, looking not that high and mighty now, are you?” He tilted his head. “I believe it is you who's going to fall to the scraplets first.”

“You... Are going to... fall as well,” Megatron growled through clenched dental plates. His optics were flickering, and Optimus's spark throbbed in unison.

[Did it work?]

[Not yet.] Megatron's fingers trembled. [Don't stop.] There was a terrible noise of thousands saw teeth digging into living metal, shredding it, devouring it, and Optimus couldn't see Megatron's legs under the moving mass of scraplets.

“At least I'd get to see you perish!” Optimus's gaze darted up at the Judges. They moved even closer to the pit, muttering something in their native tongue and waving tentacles excitedly. They didn't seem to have seen through the act. “Innocent my aft! This will be a worthy punishment for what you did to Cybertron, for what you tried to do to Earth! Prowl died because of you!!!”

He wasn't going to yell this last phrase so loudly, he wasn't going to say it at all, but as his vocalizer screeched and his hands balled into fists, he almost believed himself.

And at that moment Megatron's lips curved in a tormented grin.

[Yes!] he cried over the commlink. Optimus heard the roar of thrusters activating on full power. Purple fire burst from inside the swarm of scraplets, burning some alive and scaring off the rest, and for one long horrifying second Optimus was afraid that he'd be left behind. But then he was grabbed unceremoniously, his face squashed against hard grey chestplate, and swept into the air. Optimus clutched at Megatron's shoulder pads, finger joints groaning from strain; he heard some laser shots and screams in the background, but all thoughts about this commotion were pushed aside by mind-numbing fear of being *dropped*. Optimus's spark was racing like mad, energon rushed through his fuel lines, all of his body paralyzed by realization that he had nothing under his feet and only his worst enemy, the treacherous leader of the Decepticons, to rely on. The howling of the wind around them joined with the howling of thrusters as they flew through the sky of the unknown planet, and Optimus clung to Megatron for dear life, not even caring about what his arms and legs were wrapped around. Flying without the jetpack definitely wasn't a pleasant experience.

Fortunately, Megatron kept his word this time: he never attempted to push Optimus away. In fact, when after a while the Prime calmed down a bit he began noticing that there was something off about the sound of thrusters. That wheezing and screeching definitely wasn't normal, and those sudden losses of attitude became worrisome. Megatron drew his EM field tight, but Optimus was so close that he could still sense its pulse with tension. Optimus opened his optics, wondering if he

should ask what was wrong....

And then they crashed.

Optimus screamed and let go of the Decepticon as they fell through what seemed to be a canopy of a strange forest. Branches and vines were snapping under Optimus, denting his plating, stabbing into his seams, scratching his face, and he curled up into a ball, praying not to get tangled or lose a leg, until finally with a loud clang he tumbled to the ground.

It took a klik for Optimus's processor to register that the uncontrolled movement was over. Slowly he straightened his sore limbs and sat up, dizzy after the fall. The forest around him was still, silence disturbed only by the squeaks of broken boughs above him.

It was a weird forest, to be honest. More than anything it reminded Optimus of the jungles he saw on Earthian TV, but this jungle appeared, for the lack of a better word, robotic. The trees' bark was metal and segmented; the ground itself was metal, composed of unknown alloys. The vines slithering around the trees, the grass, the bushes – everything gleamed slightly in the dim rays of sunlight that managed to reach through the canopy. The plants – if they could be called plants – were leafless, but the twigs created thick nets that resembled bare neural or fuel systems.

Optimus had never seen such a puzzling place. Forests on Cybertron were crystallic, while this jungle appeared almost organic.

A low groan was heard from his left, taking Optimus out of his contemplations. He rose to his feet, went through his systems' damage report to check if anything was broken (fortunately, the injuries were mostly shallow) and headed in the direction of the sound.

“Megatron?” he called, pushing the exuberant vegetation aside. “Is it you?”

“Who else,” the Decepticon's voice answered, and Optimus stepped into another crash landing sight.

Megatron was sitting on the ground, half-buried under a pile of debris. New cracks and dents appeared on his armor, stray sticks got stuck in the joints; both of them made quite a pair right now.

“How far away did we fly?” Optimus asked, throwing his head back to examine the hole in the canopy. It would be obviously easy to spot from above.

“About 40 hics. I didn't see any drones chasing us,” Megatron shifted uncomfortably. “The Quintessons weren't ready to intercept us in the air, and now that they lost us they'd have to search the entire area. You're lucky you Autobots took up the life signal dampener technology,” the Decepticon smirked wryly, “or I'd have had to drop you at the pit.”

Optimus shuddered.

“How nice of you,” he muttered. “In any case, we need to move out. Flying would be too dangerous now that the Quints will be looking for us, and I doubt altmodes will help us in these thickets. We'll have to walk on foot.”

“You'll have to go on your own.”

“What? Why?” Optimus frowned. What sense did parting ways now make? Did Megatron have a plan of getting off the planet? So he wanted to get rid of Optimus and escape alone?

“Because I can't walk,” Megatron said simply. He shifted again, brushing the twigs off, and Optimus saw what he meant.

The warlord's legs were practically gone below the knees. The thrusters that were once buried deep under the armor and servos were the only parts the scraplets didn't get to devour completely, but even they were covered with teeth marks and cracks and seemed to be crushed after the harsh landing. Severed wires and burned chunks of circuitry were sparking and smoking. There was no trace of flight locks – the scraplets ate them along with the outer plating and the circuitry they were wired into.

Optimus's insides clenched in sympathy, but he forced his face to remain neutral. Megatron still was his enemy, and using the scraplets to get rid of the flight locks was his idea. Nevertheless...

“I'm not leaving you behind in this state,” he declared.

Megatron winced.

“Don't be a fool, Autobot. I am not your friend, I am clearly a liability to you, and I can take care of myself.”

“I'm not leaving another mech to the Quintessons,” Optimus repeated firmly, “even if he is my enemy.”

“I would've left you.”

“I know,” Optimus murmured, although he had some doubts about that. Megatron had a chance to leave him – back in the scraplet pit, when he was free of the locks – but the Decepticon took Optimus with him. And if he did that so that he could use Optimus's help afterwards – why was he refusing it now? Perhaps he didn't think the damage would be so devastating...

Then Megatron's patience ran out.

“Oh for spark's sake, Autobot, will you get lost already? I can't move while you are here!”

And that slip of the tongue along with the distressed burst of the EM field told Optimus everything. Megatron was pragmatic, but maybe there were limits to how much of his dignity he was ready to give up. He refused to let Optimus see him crawl.

And Megatron was too large for Optimus to carry him.

“I don't think we should move anywhere right now,” the Prime said tactfully and cast a glance at the darkening sky. “It's almost dusk, and who knows what goes on in this forest at night. It's safer to stay together, at least for now. I suggest we take some rest.” He paused. “Do you want me to disable the receptors in your legs?”

“I've already done that,” Megatron replied curtly. Optimus's optics widened.

“So fast? But it's a complicated procedure...”

“For an Autobot – maybe. I'm a warbuild; we are supposed to be able to fight in any condition, so we can disable all systems in the stumps of severed limbs. I believe your flying twins might be able to do it too.” His unblinking stare was unreadable, and Optimus coughed, turning around. So much for an attempt to ease the awkwardness.

He was acting unreasonably, his sensible part told him. He was endangering himself by lingering

here; if Megatron didn't want to move in his presence, it was just another reason to leave him and give both of them a chance to find a way out. But everything in his spark rebelled against this logic. It was wrong to leave a wounded person here, no matter who they were. And...

Somehow being alone in this jungle was much scarier.

As the darkness descended rapidly upon the forest, Optimus rummaged through the pile of broken branches and picked up one that felt heavy enough to serve as a makeshift club. Here, in the middle of an alien forest, he missed his axe terribly. Caution be damned, he'd be thankful even for Megatron's fusion cannon! But if Optimus didn't destroy it personally, it would have been confiscated by the Autobots back on Cybertron.

Cybertron... A sudden wave of homesickness overwhelmed Optimus, and he looked up forlornly, like in hope to see Hadeen among the hundreds of stars. But there was nothing but pitch blackness above; if this planet had a moon, it was invisible behind the veil of clouds.

Optimus dropped on the ground not far from Megatron, but not too close either. Never before did he feel so lonely and forsaken. Earth was strange to him too, but at least then he had friends beside him; now there was only Megatron, and his presence didn't do much for Optimus to feel safe. If anything, it only made Optimus's battle protocols stay alert, heightening his senses, - a constant reminder that he was, in truth, completely alone. The Autobots sent him away; Sentinel sent him away. An Elite Guard flagship with Ultra Magnus on board won't magically appear in the sky in order to bring him home. Optimus hugged his knees and forbid himself to cry.

The forest seemed to have calmed down after the commotion Optimus and Megatron created – or perhaps it was simply waking up for the night life. In the inky darkness something was rustling and chirring, but no bellows or cries could be heard. These quiet noises got on Optimus's nerves until he caught himself twitching. He needed a distraction.

“Megatron?” His own voice seemed too loud, and Optimus switched to a whisper. He could use the commlink, but selfishly chose against it: any sound that could block the rustles was welcome. “Do you have any idea what planet this is?”

He could see Megatron's face in the dim red light of his optics as the warlord turned his head. The expression was perfectly impassive – too impassive to be natural.

“I'm not sure.” He paused. “But I guess that this might be Quintessa.”

Now this caught Optimus's attention.

“Quintessa? The Quintessons' homeworld? But they never allow foreigners to visit their capital!”

“We weren't supposed to survive the experience. Besides, it's just a speculation.” Megatron's optics lost their focus, staring into distance. “We saw three Quintesson Judges, and I've never heard of them leaving their homeworld. And what is more... The Quintessons are an ancient race. They are mostly organic, but they have robotic parts integrated into their bodies – not truly technorganics, but cyborgs, if I have to choose a word. And this planet... It looks organic, but is made of metal. I believe the ancient Quintessons might've cyberformed their homeworld.”

“First themselves and then their planet?” Optimus stroked the ground semi-consciously, suddenly overcome by a strange nausea. “It sounds... wrong.” Who would do such a thing to an entire world? He imagined Cybertron turned organic, and then Earth – roboticized. Bringing two types of life together was one thing, but completely altering them was another.

Megatron didn't answer, just shrugged, obviously not interested in further discussion – and Optimus went silent again.

Neither of them recharged during that night. Was it because of the forest or mutual mistrust, Optimus couldn't tell. But when the invisible sun finally rose beyond the wall of trees, Optimus's frame was numb with tension and accumulated tiredness. His multiple wounds ached and joints creaked from all the foreign objects stuck inside them. The worst thing was that his fuel levels were nearing dangerously low levels, and he didn't know if he could get at least somewhat suitable surrogate for energon on this planet.

However, soon they faced more urgent problems.

The morning came with a thrum of engines in the sky. Optimus jumped to his feet, biting his lips and clutching his club, missing his axe more than ever. Megatron lifted a sharp piece of metal in which Optimus recognized a chunk of the Decepticon's own plating.

[This is your last chance to hide in the forest,] the warlord told him over the commlink.

[I'm staying.]

It was probably a very stupid thing to do, really, and Megatron's grimace was a testament to that, but then, Optimus didn't think he'd be able to get far. He was smaller than Megatron, but he was quite large nevertheless, and his way through the thickets would be very easy to trace from the place of the crash landing.

Optimus saw the round shapes of battle drones overhead, black against the yellow sky, heard the telltale sounds of laser fire and saw the flashes of purple light... But none of the shots were aimed at him or Megatron. Instead the drones began to explode one by one, and beyond the blasts Optimus heard another sound – the roar of powerful thrusters.

Large shadow blocked the sunlight, then changed its form abruptly, and as it descended Optimus finally was able to see its colors – purple and green. The Prime's spark thrashed around in its casing, and his fuel tanks churned. He recognized this paintjob – and this mech.

With a heavy thud their visitor landed, immediately falling on his knees before Megatron.

“Master! I'm so glad I have found you at last!” Lugnut bellowed, bowing deeply. “I am ready to serve you as always, oh great and glorious leader!”

At this moment Optimus wished that he had listened to Megatron and vanished in the forest while he still could.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, there will be more MegOP interaction from now on. :)

Part II, Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I came as soon as I could, my liege,” Lugnut was still kneeling without showing any desire to change position. He, too, appeared pretty battered, his armor scorched and dented in many places, but it didn't lessen his enthusiasm at all. “I'm sorry it wasn't soon enough. Please forgive me for not coming faster to save you!” His main round optic in the middle of his forehead cycled, focusing on Megatron's injuries. “What happened to your legs?”

“Scraplets,” Megatron answered dryly. He seemed to recover from surprise pretty fast. “You may rise, my ever loyal warrior.”

Lugnut beamed and hurried to draw himself up to his full height, which made Optimus take a step back. He got kind of used to Megatron's size, but Lugnut was even taller and twice as bulky. His enormous hulking frame towered over Optimus, and crude claws that he had for hands were large enough to close around Optimus's waist.

Unfortunately for the Prime, Lugnut chose this moment to pay attention to him.

“Autobot scum! Should I dispose of him for you, master?”

It was amusing, really, how Lugnut's intonation could change from threatening and scary to one of an eager puppy, but right now Optimus found it not very funny. He didn't have his axe or even the grappling hook, his jetpack was left on Cybertron and the club would probably break after the first hit...

“No, Lugnut. The Autobot is our ally for now.”

Megatron's tone was more suited for someone sitting on a throne rather than lying on the ground, wounded and incapacitated. Lugnut instantly froze, but the one most bewildered was Optimus himself. Surely now that Megatron had real support he wouldn't need him anymore..?

“We must get out of here immediately,” the warlord cast a wary glance upwards. “Laser fire betrayed our position. Is the sky clear?”

“I destroyed all drones that were nearby, my lord.” Lugnut pushed his chest forward proudly.

“Then we can risk a flight to find a less obvious place to descend.” Megatron shifted, trying to sit straight, but he didn't even need to give any orders: Lugnut bent down and picked him up as lightly as if he weighted nothing.

Megatron's face at that moment was absolutely priceless, but Optimus didn't have much time to gloat, because the warlord nodded in his direction.

“Take him too.”

“Yes, my liege.” Lugnut moved Megatron to rest on one of his arms, and before Optimus was able to say anything he was grabbed roughly, thrown over Lugnut's shoulder – and then they were flying, Optimus holding on to the purple armor on Lugnut's back and cursing silently all Decepticons and their horrible manners as the jungle was gleaming far below like an ocean of quicksilver.

The flight ended as abruptly as it began – on Megatron's command. Luckily, this time there was no crash; instead they landed neatly on a small clearing. Optimus slipped off Lugnut's back, his knees wobbling; he *definitely* didn't like flying without a jetpack.

“Good. Now we disappear in the forest and continue moving under its cover.” It was very hard to look dignified while being carried bridal-style, but Megatron almost managed it.

Almost.

“Meanwhile you will tell us how you escaped from Trypticon and how we escape from here.”

“Of course, master! But... In front of him?” Lugnut's side optics zoomed in on Optimus.

“As I said, Optimus Prime is our ally for now.” Megatron's expression as he inspected the Prime was unreadable. “Besides, you have already escaped. Him knowing the details won't affect anything.”

Optimus frowned, not sure where this was going, but preferred to remain silent. The less attention he attracted, the better.

They began their way through the thickets. Lugnut moved forward like a barge, pushing the bushes away; all Optimus had to do was to keep behind his shoulder and watch that the bushes didn't whip him in the face as they closed up behind Lugnut's back. Frankly speaking, he doubted he could do much more, not with his fuel levels so low. He had to save up energy.

And not to miss a word from Lugnut's tale; any detail could be crucial for the Autobot cause.

“After the news about the Quintessons' demands reached New Kaon, my lady Strika had to change the plans,” the huge Decepticon began. “She had to forfeit all previous preparations and hurry up with the escape. She activated our sleeper agent who stole a plasma dynamic thruster (along with stabilizers to keep it from transwarping randomly) and brought it to Trypticon.”

Optimus barely restrained himself from moaning aloud. Sleeper agent? *Another* Decepticon agent in the Autobots' midst? Oh sweet Allspark, please make it someone *not* from the High Command; otherwise it would appear they had more Decepticons than Autobots in the Council.

“The fortress transwarped to the Decepticon Empire. My lady Strika came on board, reclaiming Trypticon. Then the Mini-Cons opened the cells and we were free at last!”

Alright, this time Optimus couldn't stay silent.

“The Mini-Cons?” he shouted. “Mini-Cons betrayed us?!”

Megatron peered at him over Lugnut's shoulder.

“They didn't betray anyone, Optimus Prime,” he explained calmly. “They are *neutral*. When they looked after an Autobot prison on an Autobot-controlled Cybertron, they followed your laws. When Trypticon was moved to the Decepticon space, they began following ours. Simple as that.” He dared to look smug, the bastard.

“You planned this,” Optimus hissed through clenched dental plates. “You planned it all along!”

“Of course, did you think I would sit idly and wait for your so-called justice?” Megatron sent him a pleasant grin. “I didn't plan on using our sleeper agent and the plasma dynamic thruster, though, that's Strika's improvisation. Spectacular one, by the way; just as expected from my best general.”

Lugnut's EM field burst with joy and pride.

“She serves you with loyalty and fervor, my liege! There is nothing she won't do to ensure your glorious victory over the vile Autobots!”

“I know, Lugnut,” Megatron said with painfully reserved patience. Optimus snickered mentally. He deliberately ignored the question of whom Megatron intended to use instead of the sleeper agent... and how.

Meanwhile Lugnut continued with his story.

“I wanted to gather our troops and come after you the moment I learned that the cowardly Autobots sold you to the Quintessons, but Strika stopped me. She said that an army or a squad invading the Quintesson space would be counted as a declaration of war. She said we couldn't afford it.”

Optimus thought that he heard Megatron murmur: “Bless her.”

“Strika decided that somebody had to go alone. She said that you had enough brains to come up with a way to escape, but what you needed was firepower, so she chose me. I am glad to be useful to you, my liege! All firepower I have is at your disposal, oh wise and noble...”

“The facts, Lugnut.” Oh, Optimus was beginning to think he'd *enjoy* this trip; Megatron's barely suppressed annoyance was the best entertainment he had in weeks. “How did you find us?”

“Swindle contacted us and offered information, for a price, of course,” Lugnut let out a throaty rumble of displeasure. “He has connections among the Quintessons, that traitorous scrap. We learned that you were taken to Quintessa, so Strika gave me the plasma dynamic thruster we stole from the Autobots, and I set off...”

“Plasma dynamic thruster?!” Megatron yelled. “And you didn't say anything?! Lugnut, you thick-headed idiot! Activate it, and let's get out of here!”

Lugnut actually stopped, so that Optimus (who was as shocked as Megatron) nearly smashed into his back.

“Y-yeah... About that...” The huge Decepticon drooped his shoulders, posture emanating guilt and embarrassment (which was quite clumsy, since Lugnut still carried Megatron in his arms). “When I appeared at Quintessa's orbit I was spotted by patrol fighters. They chased me through the asteroid field, so I hid the thruster on one of the asteroids. They will never discover it, my liege! Strika said I should keep the device for the Decepticons at all costs,” he added, crouching and trembling under Megatron's glare. “Then I headed to the planet, but I barely managed to get through; the squids unfurled a hunter's net around Quintessa, trained to destroy anything or anyone of Cybertronian origin.”

“So what you mean to say,” Megatron began slowly, optics narrowed and blazing white, “is that the plasma dynamic thruster – the only example of space bridge technology the Decepticons currently possess! – is up at the orbit, unguarded, while we are stuck here with no means of reaching it?”

“I... Could carry you to the orbit?” Lugnut suggested, but even Optimus, for all his inexperience with flying, could say that it was a foolish idea. With additional weight on him Lugnut would lose speed and dexterity, becoming a pretty easy target.

“No thank you, I don't plan on a suicide any time soon.” Megatron closed his optics and sighed, trying to get a hold on himself. “How did you find us anyway?”

“My spark led me to you, oh magnificent one!” Lugnut proclaimed, but then his voice went back to what counted for him as meek. “And, well, the drones.”

“I see.” When Megatron opened his optics, he was composed again. “Then we need to devise a way to get past the hunter net. I hope you can identify that asteroid where you hid the thruster.”

“Of course, my liege! Nothing will stand between you and your grand and glorious return!”

“Um, excuse me? Can I interrupt?” Optimus raised his open palms as he found himself in the crossfire of two red gazes. He had read about the Quintesson hunter nets; giant webs of interconnected sensor-filled satellites wide enough to cover entire planets, they could be attuned to search for materials and structures specific to certain life forms, and when such a life form was detected, battle drones and cannons from the satellites could destroy the intruder with maximum speed and efficiency. The Quintessons' infamous weapon they used to “negotiate” with worlds they had trade disputes with.

“What if we use a Quintesson ship?” Optimus spoke directly to Megatron. “This way we won't be spotted by the sensors in the hunter net. The satellites are automatic, the Quints won't even know we passed the net. And Lugnut won't need to carry anyone.”

Lugnut growled.

“How dare you speak in the presence of great Mega...”

“Silence, Lugnut.” Megatron tilted his head slightly, never breaking the optic contact. “This sounds reasonable. The trick is to find a Quintesson ship and steal it without alerting the Quints. Lugnut, you have seen Quintessa from above. Did you notice a spaceport or a major city?”

“No, my lord,” Lugnut shook his head to accentuate his point. “It's all covered in those weird clouds, but they are mostly transparent. The planet is wild all around.”

“This doesn't make sense.” Optimus frowned. “Is this really Quintessa? It's supposed to be the capital world of the Quintesson Sphere, a metropolis!”

“We don't know that,” Megatron tapped his chin. “Nobody has ever *been* to Quintessa. For some reason it was abandoned by its people, with the exception of the Judges and their court. Perhaps it's a cultural thing. But Quintessa is the squids' homeworld; therefore, it must have at least traces of civilization. The Quintessons created an interstellar empire, so there must be spaceports. We just need to find them.”

Which, considering the thick forests and a lack of map, would be quite a challenge.

“The Quints used to be organic, right?” Optimus paced across the tiny clearing Lugnut's massive frame created. “Organics require their fuel, just like we require energon. On Earth most cities were built near large bodies of water. Perhaps the ancient Quintessons chose places for their cities the same way?”

“Like we built our cities next to energon crystal fields? Plausible. Lugnut,” Megatron's voice rose, becoming commanding again. “Recall the location of the nearest large water source and set course to it.”

Lugnut's optic shutters dilated for a klik as he was making calculations.

“That would be about a solar cycle to the north if we move with our current speed.”

“So two days if we take a break at night.” Megatron nodded to himself, satisfied.

“I can walk in the night as well, my liege! I will not rest until I bring you to your destination, and...”

“It's too dark here at night, and we can't use any lights if we don't want to be caught.” Apparently, Megatron was accustomed to stopping Lugnut's speeches.

“Oh! Your wisdom is infinite, my lord! Of course, we will take a break.”

Megatron just sighed, and Optimus felt a sudden rush of gratitude; Lugnut might be ready to walk for solar cycles if his “great and glorious” master so desired, but Optimus's joints were aching, and he was looking forward to the possibility of a break.

“Excellent.” Megatron squirmed, still rather uncomfortable with being carried around. “Move out.”

And they moved out.

Optimus spent the second half of the day in silence, concentrated on walking. His fuel level reached red mark, and he tried to minimize his body's activity in order to conserve energy. Lugnut was stomping in front of him relentlessly, never faltering despite his injuries, and Optimus was afraid to say anything about his problem. Who knows what the Decepticons will do... Despite Megatron's approval of his ideas, Optimus had very little faith in the Decepticon lord. The warbuilds were ruthless and valued efficiency above all; showing weakness to them would be a grave mistake.

Now, however, Optimus was wondering what his unwanted companions would do after he would inevitably fall to the ground unconscious, all his energy drained. Fortunately, it didn't come to this: when the sun began moving to the horizon behind the thin yellow veil of clouds, Megatron ordered his soldier to stop.

“We need to refuel,” the warlord said as Lugnut gently put him down on a fallen trunk. “These plants are robotic, so they must rely on some sort of fuel, and last night we heard strange sounds coming from the forest; it is likely that it's inhabited by some animals which might be robotic too. Find us something we can use as a fuel source.”

“Yes, my lord!” Lugnut saluted excitedly, as if he didn't spend the entire solar cycle fighting and travelling.

“Wait. Give me some weapon.”

“Of course!” Lugnut dug into his subspace and took out a heavy blaster. “Please forgive me for not thinking about it earlier, my lady Strika insisted that I take enough...”

“The fuel, Lugnut,” Megatron reminded, not even bothering to hide the ire in his voice.

“Yessir!” Lugnut bowed, saluted again and finally ran off. Optimus was left alone with Megatron.

The young Prime found a clear spot and settled down on the ground carefully, simply happy to give his poor legs some rest. He was built for driving down the smooth, wide roads of Cybertron, not for struggling with bushes and vines in creepy half-organic woods.

He was also never meant to be stuck in the middle of said woods with a crippled Decepticon warlord. Who didn't look quite as confident or arrogant without his faithful subordinate.

“Why are you so mean to Lugnut?” Optimus asked, surprising himself. He wasn't going to start a conversation, but perhaps the fatigue dulled his sense of self-preservation. “It's like you're doing everything to enrage him.”

Megatron blinked.

“Since when are you so concerned about Lugnut?”

“I... I'm not concerned about him, but he's the only source of safety and help we have. What if he gets angry and leaves us? Or even worse, attacks?”

Megatron's optics opened ever wider.

“He won't do that. He is loyal to me and my cause.”

“It makes it even worse!” Optimus was fed up with Decepticons and their atrocious behavior. “He genuinely likes you, and you boss him around and treat him like... like a servant!”

“He *is* my servant,” the line of Megatron's lips became harsh. “He knows it and appreciates it, and when I give an order, he follows it.”

“But you're so... rude!”

“What do you want me to do, Autobot? Say 'please'?”

“Oh, I don't know, to show appreciation for what people do for you, maybe?” Optimus jumped to his feet, unable to stay on the ground. “To stop taking love and loyalty for granted?”

His balled fists were trembling, engine revving furiously. He had no idea why he suddenly became so agitated, what made his voice rise and his face burn, but he couldn't stay silent anymore, couldn't stay the scared little Autobot.

“That's an interesting thought,” Megatron's voice seemed velvety in contrast. “Maybe you should gather up courage and say it to Sentinel?”

It felt like somebody had just punched him in the gut. Optimus opened his mouth, gaping, while battle protocols were activating and his vision grew red with warnings about the lack of fuel and inability to fight.

“Shut up... Shut up!!!” He was shouting now, his entire frame shaking.

But Megatron wasn't finished yet.

“Lugnut is happy to be a servant,” he uttered, staring right into Optimus's optics. “*Are you?*”

Optimus almost hit him – but then his gaze fell on Megatron's damaged legs, and his wrath died out, basic Autobot programming categorizing the warlord as a wounded person in need of protection. Optimus forced those instincts back as well; Megatron definitely wasn't the one who needed protecting, but there was indeed no use in quarreling with him.

It was shameful, really, - how easy Megatron could make him lose his cool. But Optimus guessed it was his fault anyway: he gave Megatron all the necessary information for manipulating his emotions. Anyway, what was done was done.

Optimus ex-vented slowly and went back to his seat. Fortunately, Megatron didn't make any new attempts to goad him.

Lugnut return right before the dusk with a carcass of a large creature on his shoulders. It looked a little like Earthian octopus, but fatter and metallic. Each of the ten thick segmented tentacles ended with a claw (perhaps for climbing the trees). Lugnut tore off one of the appendages, and fluorescent purple liquid spilled from the severed fuel lines.

“Please, my lord,” Lugnut said, turning the octopus's body so that the wound faced up. “Its energon is strange, but suitable.”

Megatron didn't need any more invitations: he sank his fangs into the exposed veins, angled the creature's carcass and began drinking. Lugnut busied himself with the tentacle, holding it over his lipless maw and letting the purple liquid flow freely.

Optimus shuddered as he watched this barbaric display. His fuel system expressed interest, but his mind protested against sucking energon out of another living being. That was... wrong. He knew that some species did that – pits, Sari did that, although the humans preferred to process and thermally prepare the animal tissue before consuming it. Still, it didn't make him less disgusted.

Megatron put the carcass away for a moment and licked his lips. With his dental plates and fingers stained with purple fluid he looked positively feral. How quickly did this smooth-talking mech, who was known as a connoisseur of rare energon blends, shed the thin guise of culture and revert to total savagery! Maybe the Academy teachers were right, after all, and the Decepticons were really all monsters pretending to be civilized people. And when those slanted red optics fixed on Optimus, the Prime tightened his plating instinctively. Megatron grasped one of the tentacles, wrenched it off with frightening ease and offered it to him.

“Come here, Optimus Prime. You need to refuel too.”

Optimus's first wish was to decline and to remain as far from the Decepticons as possible, but his fuel system rebelled. His HUD was red with warnings, and with a gulp Optimus succumbed to his fate.

He approached the Decepticons cautiously, noticing how Lugnut's auxiliary optics were following him, and took the tentacle, careful not to touch Megatron's bloodied fingers. The warlord returned to his meal right away, and Optimus hurried to avert his gaze. The octopus's appendage was hanging limp in his grip, heavy and repulsively supple; segmented metal “skin” made it flexible, too organic for Optimus's liking. On the other side, maybe it was better. Optimus doubted he could drink the lifeblood of something that resembled a real, sentient Cybertronian. Suppressing another shudder, Optimus sat down, brought the tentacle to his face and forced himself to drink.

The fuel was strange, thicker than energon and with a peculiar tangy taste. Not the worst thing that Optimus ever tried (at least it *had* a taste, unlike the infamous army rations), but the mere fact that it was a living being's energon made him want to purge his tanks. Alas, he couldn't afford such pickiness; if he wanted to survive here among two Decepticons, he needed his full strength. Every second he was aware of how small and frail he was compared to the massive warbuilds, and he didn't have any weapons to defend himself in case Megatron got bored with him or Lugnut decided that he was not worthy of occupying the same space as his glorious lord.

Thank the Allspark that Lugnut didn't know about Optimus and Megatron's private encounters in prison!

Or did he?

This thought made Optimus freeze with the tentacle's vein in his mouth. He made sure to shut the other 'cons' cells off, but what if Megatron told them about Optimus's visits later? No, wait, the cameras were on when Optimus wasn't there, and the inmates' commlinks were blocked... But what if Megatron still conveyed it somehow? What if he's telling Lugnut all about this right now?!

Optimus cast a hunted glance at the huge warrior, but Lugnut seemed to be busy with extracting energon with his rudimentary claws and mouth. No; no, Optimus was just getting paranoid. Even if Lugnut knew, he wouldn't do anything without Megatron's order.

But what about Megatron? Sure, he acted all nice and attentive back in Trypticon, but he was a captive trying to curry his jailer's favor. Now *he* had the upper hand. Optimus overstepped normal boundaries in prison, and now, when their roles were basically reversed, Megatron could do anything. Optimus wasn't dumb; despite Megatron calling him an "ally", the Prime realized very well what exactly he was.

This thought was... more than alarming. Gritting his dental plates, Optimus continued drinking with renewed vigor. He might be in trouble, but he won't be caught unawares.

Together they finished with the octopus-creature before the last rays of light died out. Ten severed and dried tentacles were lying in a neat pile near the emptied carcass. Optimus licked his fingers, silently lamenting the lack of solvent or at least water: broken fuel lines made bad cups, and the beast's fluids got splattered over Optimus's neck and arms.

The Decepticons were having the same problem, especially Lugnut, who, due to the structure of his face and hands, wasn't the most precise person. And Lugnut was the first to do something about it: he dropped on his knees before Megatron, opened his mouth and licked the purple stains off Megatron's chest.

Optimus's jaw dropped. At first he expected Megatron to snarl and punch his overzealous subordinate, but the warlord simply tilted his head to give Lugnut better access as the large, thick glossa moved up from his chest to slither over his collar and neck cables. And when the warrior was finished with cleaning, Megatron proceeded to return the favor.

Optimus gasped and shifted in his seat, his face flushed. Were they... Were they going to frag right here, in front of him?! But neither Megatron, nor Lugnut made any attempts to reach for the sensitive seams or interface panels; in fact, Lugnut sat very still as Megatron lapped up the stray dribbles of purple fluid off his armor.

And then the warlord turned to him, narrowed optics glimmering in the twilight.

"Get over here, Optimus Prime," he purred. "You're dirty."

Optimus's spark pounced in his chest so hard it hurt. He tried to scurry away, but Lugnut's gigantic claw grabbed him like a sparkling.

"The great and glorious Megatron ordered you to come here," he growled, pushing Optimus to the log.

"I... No! I don't want to..! What the slag?!" Optimus struggled, although he had to admit that it was half-hearted and rather pathetic; somewhere deep inside he knew that he'd have to live through this.

"Calm down, Autobot," Megatron was lounging on the log like in a theater seat, clearly amused, but the absence of aggression in his voice soothed Optimus a little. "Energion is precious; we can't

let it go to waste.”

Then he grabbed Optimus’s wrist (or rather, his forearm, since Megatron’s palm was *that* large) and promptly licked the dribble off its side. Lugnut leaned over Optimus, aiming for the blot on his windshield, but in this very instance Megatron growled, red optics flashing dangerously. The warrior let out an apologetic whine and backed off.

Optimus bit his lip, concentrated on one task: to sit completely motionless as he was licked. He was stuck between two warbuilds, powerful EM fields intruding into his personal space from both sides, and his face was so hot he wouldn’t be surprised if it began steaming. It was worse than having his fingers sucked in Trypticon; this time Megatron had access to his entire frame. And when the warlord was done with his arm, he moved to the other one, then the windshield, then higher yet...

Heavy black hand lay on his cheek, turning his head, and in the semi-darkness of the nightfall Optimus saw Megatron’s glowing optics closer than ever before. Warm nimble glossa licked the last drops off his chin, and for one terrible, terrible moment Optimus believed that the next touch would be a searing kiss on the lips – but then Megatron smirked and moved away, releasing him.

Optimus didn’t have energon on his lips, after all.

He was left to sit on the log while Lugnut picked Megatron up and carried him to a secure place between a tree’s roots. It was getting harder and harder to see the surroundings, so Optimus snapped out of his astounded trance and settled on the ground with his back to the fallen trunk. He wasn’t sure that he’d be able to recharge next to the Decepticons, especially after all that had happened.

“We will have to take turns at watching,” Megatron put the blaster on his lap. “Lugnut, you’re first. Wake me up when half of the night passes.”

“But my lord! I can guard you all night! You can rely on me, oh glorious...”

“I need you operating at maximum capacity, since you are our best fighter right now,” Megatron winced, like dealing with a chronic headache, but kept his tone even. “I trust in your ability to follow orders, my most loyal servant.”

“O-of course, master!” Lugnut bowed deeply. “I will do everything you command!”

Megatron nodded, and the light of his optics shut down. Lugnut dropped on the ground at a polite distance from his lord, his bulky silhouette slowly merging with the blackness of Quintessa’s moonless and starless night.

Optimus pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. His frame was still radiating heat and his lips were stinging. He felt stupid, vulnerable and violated; glitch-headed Decepticons and their warped customs! What civilized creatures eat spilled food off each other’s frames? And Megatron *knew* what effect it’d have on Optimus, he knew and he did it for fun. He wouldn’t be so brazen if he was behind the bars!

...Okay, maybe he would. Damn slagger.

But Megatron didn’t seem to want to get rid of him, so perhaps Optimus could recharge this time? Just a little? He wouldn’t even need to take a turn guarding their camp. Megatron wouldn’t... do anything to him while he’s unconscious, right?

Optimus suppressed the unwanted thoughts, trying to relax. His battle protocols registered two

hostile presences in close proximity and thus demanded that he remained vigil, but Optimus wasn't going to disable them. He was trained to recharge with those protocols on, although he doubted this ability right now. Oh well, even if he'd have to spend the entire night awake, at least his frame will get some rest for recovery and self-repair.

Sighing quietly, Optimus leaned on the trunk and prepared to wait for morning.

Chapter End Notes

I might have some sort of oral fixation, I dunno. XD

Part II, Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Minor reference to cannibalism in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Optimus woke up to his proximity sensors alerting him with hysterical beeps. Onlining his optics, he was met with the sight of Lugnut standing too close to him for comfort. But then the Decepticon made no attempt to attack; he simply turned away and grumbled:

“He's awake, my lord.”

Optimus relaxed slightly and overrode his battle protocols, recalling the events of past two days. Right, they were on Quintessa and he was the Decepticons' prisoner. Optimus blinked; did he really fall into recharge? Right next to the enemies? He must've been really tired if he managed that, or maybe there was something in that octopus's fuel.

Optimus decided not to get distracted by cursing himself for the lack of caution. Across the clearing Lugnut was picking Megatron off the ground, and Optimus hurried to stand up too. That was a little hard, since his joints felt stiff and engine was just warming up. And was it condensation on his plating?

In fact, condensation was coating not only his armor, but also the metal ground and the plants. Was it colder now than the last morning? Optimus wiped a trail on his damp plating and looked around more attentively. What he took for an aftereffect of his recharge was, in truth, mist: while Optimus could see Megatron and Lugnut pretty well, the jungle beyond their camp was shrouded in yellowish fog – as if Quintessa's clouds sank from the sky. Optimus's thermal receptors indicated that the outside temperature had dropped.

“Let's hope this haze will dissipate under the sun rays.” Megatron scowled at the mist and revved his engine, trying to heat up his body and dry the moisture. “It won't be a pleasant walk otherwise.”

“I would walk through a storm if you would require it, oh glorious Megatron!”

Optimus was on Megatron's side here, but preferred not to voice it. But, to be fair, a walk was just what he needed to chase the cold away.

The fog indeed dissipated as the day reached its middle. However, the true joy awaited Optimus and his companions in the afternoon: they stumbled upon the ruins of a structure, barely visible under the vines and between the trees, yet clearly artificial in origin. One building became two, then many, and soon the travelers found themselves in the middle of what used to be a city.

There was no surprise Lugnut didn't notice anything from above; Optimus was fairly sure that, were they flying, they'd never discover this place. The jungle took over it so long ago, that the trees grew to their full size, completely hiding the ruins under their canopies. Tall houses crumbled into

hills of concrete and metal, smaller buildings kept their foundations, but lost the roofs, and the floors collapsed into the basements. The architecture was alien to Optimus, with a lot of curvy lines and asymmetric shapes; the ground was littered with parts of mechanisms that could be anything, from transport units to cleaning devices. One of those devices Megatron picked up from an empty carriage.

“It’s a portable energy generator,” he brushed the dust off the heavy box. “At least it resembles those old models the Quintessons sold to us when we were settling down in the exile. Do you remember, Lugnut?”

“Oh, yes, my liege!” The giant’s central optic cycled. “Does it work?”

“It doesn’t, but these things are nigh indestructible. I believe I can repair it with a basic tool kit.” Megatron scanned the area, frowning. “We’ll need a safe shelter for the night.”

The place which they chose in the end was a building of unknown purpose that, surprisingly enough, retained its roof.

“Good, this way the light won’t be seen from above.” The warlord made Lugnut carefully put him down on the floor near the entrance. “You two, search the city. We’re looking for anything that can be of use: ships, supplies, energy sources, information where to find any of these. Lugnut, don’t let the Autobot out of your sight.”

Optimus’s bitter “yeah, sure” was muffled by Lugnut’s enthusiastic “yes, my lord”.

They didn’t find any spaceships, to Optimus’s dismay; the city, apparently, wasn’t that big. The water source Lugnut recalled turned out to be a lake, but Optimus managed to persuade the Decepticon to stay away from its banks; open spaces were too dangerous for fugitives hiding from aerial assault. Lugnut took solace in catching another octopus-creature that tried to climb a half-demolished wall. Optimus cringed at the thought of another feeding (and grooming) session, but then he discovered something that lifted his spirits: on what appeared to be a former city square they stumbled upon a large metal sphere covered with rust, vines and lichens. At first Optimus didn’t pay much attention to it, but then he noticed some symbols between the net of twigs. Curious, he pulled some of the plants away – and his spark jumped in his chest.

“Lugnut!” he called over his shoulder, voice trembling with excitement. “Lugnut, help me clean this thing!”

There was a low growl behind him.

“I do not follow commands of Autobots.”

“No, no, you don’t get it!” Optimus was too elated to care about the threat. “It’s a map! A map of the planet! We’ll be able to locate the spaceport! This is the information Megatron wanted,” he added sweetly.

This was enough to win Lugnut over. Still grumbling, he began working; this was where his claws proved to be extremely effective, clasp the arm-thick vines and tearing them off with ease. Soon the sphere was clear, and, despite some holes, rust spots and inscriptions in an unknown language, it was quite readable. Optimus made snapshots of it from every angle, Lugnut copying his actions, and then they headed back.

It was already nightfall when they reached the building where they left Megatron. The warlord

managed to move to the second room for better security (Optimus made a wise choice of not asking how), and they were met with warm orange glow: Megatron got the generator operational.

“Not going to sit in complete darkness this time,” he said proudly, crossing his arms and even allowing Lugnut to finish his usual ode. “What did you find?”

“We didn’t find a spaceport, oh glorious one,” Lugnut answered from his prostrated position. “But Optimus Prime found a map.”

“Indeed?” Megatron’s optics focused on the Prime, who was still standing in the doorway. Optimus coughed.

“Yeah. Lugnut can send you the snapshots we made of it.” No way was he going to let Megatron hardline with him, even if it was just through info ports. Who knew what viruses the ‘con had and whether Optimus’s firewalls could block them. Luckily, Megatron didn’t comment on his hesitation.

They gathered around the generator, each opening the map on their HUDs.

“Alright, we are here.” It wasn’t hard to determine their location based on Lugnut’s reports and some calculations. “So this symbol means a town or a city.” Megatron scrolled through the snapshots. “Quite a lot of them on this planet.”

“I believe we need only big ones.” Optimus marked them all with red dots and sorted them by size. “There are about ten of them in the largest category. But how do we know if they have spaceports or not?”

“There are other symbols here too.” Megatron rubbed his chin. “We don’t know what they mean, but one of them might signify a spaceport. The Quintessons don’t have many spaceports in their colonies, they prefer to dock their ships and collect supplies at the orbit, so I don’t think the symbol we seek should be very common. I can also assume it’d be close to a city-symbol; that’s how Quints build them nowadays.”

After further analysis they agreed on one of the symbols as possible representation of a spaceport – and pinpointed the one closest to their current location.

“Two weeks of walking if we maintain our current speed.” Megatron leaned on the wall, marking a way on his map. “Could be worse.”

“What if we made a mistake?” Now that a course of action was chosen Optimus began having doubts. “What if it’s not a spaceport?”

Megatron only grinned nastily.

“Now that wouldn’t be great, would it?”

He didn’t elaborate, and Optimus decided not to try his patience.

Lugnut, who was keeping dutiful silence during their discussion, pushed the octopus’s carcass to the warlord.

“Please refuel, master. You will need your strength to ensure that your glorious plan goes well.”

Yeah, right; not that he’d be walking through these jungles, Optimus thought, but kept his bile to himself. He obediently took the tentacle offered to him, but this time he concentrated on being

extra careful not to spill the energon. He didn't need Megatron teasing him by licking it off, thank you very much. What little Optimus did spill, he hastily wiped off. Megatron, who was watching him with amusement, chuckled, and Optimus consoled himself with memories of pushing the warlord out of the airlock to burn in Earth's atmosphere. Ah, those were good times.

The 'cons finished with their meal and... cleaning, and the octopus's remains were shoved in the corner. Optimus curled up next to a pile of rubble, preparing for the night. The generator was emanating warmth, and the orange light made the dirty old room look almost cozy. Perhaps recharging in the Decepticons' presence wasn't very smart, but they didn't do anything to him last night, did they? Optimus sure felt like recharging. Besides, he'd be able to conserve energy that way, and the less fuel he'd have to syphon from a dead animal, the better. But then Megatron spoke:

"Lugnut, I'll take the first turn."

"As you command, master!" The huge warrior regarded this simple order like another *glorious* revelation and immediately followed it, offlining his five optics. Optimus, however, lost any desire to do the same; he knew that Megatron had a chance of watching over his unconscious frame the night before, but somehow falling asleep under the warlord's scrutiny was much harder than under Lugnut's.

Sitting awake in the same room, however, proved to be even more awkward.

"So, um," Optimus cleared his throat, not sure what to say. His wandering gaze fell on the octopus's remains. "Do you 'cons drink energon from other mechs too?"

Oh, wow. Fantastic choice of topic, Optimus, bravo.

Fortunately, Megatron seemed to find his question funny rather than offensive, if that slight curve of his lips was anything to go by.

"Depends on the situation. We do pump fuel out of our dead when energon is scarce."

Optimus didn't expect this answer.

"Wow, really?" To be honest, he was prepared for another banter, not an actual piece of information. A very disturbing piece of information.

"Special scavenger teams search the battlefields and collect everything useful from the fallen, including energon. And, well... There are some tough life situations." Megatron shrugged.

"I... I see." Optimus squirmed, growing significantly uncomfortable. Right when he was beginning to see the Decepticons as simple Cybertronians like himself they were suddenly proving to be those fairytale monsters Autobot school teachers described. "Have you ever... killed somebody for their fuel?"

"We aren't going to kill you for your fuel, Optimus Prime." Megatron smiled in reply to the Prime's shocked glance. "We wouldn't be sharing the creature's energon with you otherwise."

"That's, um, nice to know." Optimus decided to ignore the fact that Megatron avoided his question. However, he couldn't control his emotions for long. "But this is barbaric!" he blurted out, too distressed to actually bother with politeness.

"It's pragmatic." Megatron stared at the generator, its glow painting the warlord's face with golden hues. "When it comes to survival, you've got to use all the resources you have in your possession."

“That’s the difference between you and us, huh?” Optimus muttered. “You are ready to forget about morality and decency when it comes to your personal selfish goals, and we are not.”

Megatron locked optics with him, and this time the warlord was grave serious.

“Do not lecture me on morality, Optimus Prime. It was your people that forced us into submission, stripping us of freedom and dignity.”

Optimus snorted loudly.

“Yeah, yeah, I read your speeches. I’m not Lugnut, so spare me the dubious pleasure of listening to your Decepticon propaganda.”

“Propaganda? You call it *propaganda*?” Megatron’s optics flashed with such fury that Optimus recoiled, his battle protocols engaging. “I was *brought online* in flight locks, Optimus Prime!” It was amazing how Megatron could make his voice sound thundering without actually raising it, but right now Optimus didn’t muse about it; he could only press his back into the rubble behind him, frame tense and spark pounding in his chest. “In the years before you got flight locks for breaking the law, but my generation? We had to acquire a *license* to get them off. A license!” Megatron hissed this word. “But then why would you need flight if you spend your life in the mines, doing the hard manual work as your ‘rehabilitation program’? We were newsparks, for the Pits’ sake, we didn’t require any rehabilitation! So don’t tell me about Autobot ‘morality’; I lived under Autobot rule long enough to know its worth.”

He fell into silence again, and for a while all Optimus heard was the crazy wheezing of his own vents. He didn’t move, afraid that Megatron might grab his blaster, yet the seconds ticked by and nothing happened. Lugnut stirred in his recharge but didn’t wake up.

Finally Optimus dared to change his pose and relax a bit, switching his battle protocols off.

“Megatron?” He called softly. “How did you end up in the gladiatorial arena?”

For a couple of moments he was convinced that Megatron wouldn’t answer, but then the warlord finally uttered:

“I got in a fight with a guard at the mine.”

Optimus blinked.

“You got in a fight? That’s it? But if every Decepticon was sent to the arena after getting in a fight...”

The corners of Megatron’s mouth twitched, but whether in distaste or humor, Optimus couldn’t tell.

“That guard ended up dead.”

“Oh...” Optimus stared at his feet. “I see...”

He wasn’t sure what to make out of all that. He finally got his answers about Megatron’s pre-arena life, but how much of it was true? That outburst did appear pretty sudden and emotional, so it *could* be true, but then, knowing whom it was coming from... On the other hand, wouldn’t Megatron have come up with a more sympathetic sob story than “I killed a guy” if he wanted to appeal to Optimus? Or did he think it’d be too obvious a lie?

Wait, no-no-no. Optimus shook his head, chasing all these confusing thoughts away. He could sit

here and wallow in his doubts until he got completely tangled up; better just accept what he had just heard, but take it with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Although if what Megatron said *was* true, particularly the part about how Decepticons lived before the war... It made everything much more complicated. Optimus had always been taught that he had to protect his world from the menace of the Decepticons, who wanted to destroy the Autobot way of life, and Sentinel's videos showed just how vast a ravine could separate reality from government-approved propaganda. So maybe, if those old videos Optimus grew up with were just as deceitful... There was actually a possibility of resolving this conflict without annihilating one of its sides? After all, Optimus was probably the first Autobot in his entire generation who had a chance to *talk* to a Decepticon! Maybe if they continued talking, they could find a peaceful solution?

Not to mention that it would help Optimus to get out of his situation. Being the Decepticons' prisoner on Quintessa wasn't that bad, but being the Decepticons' prisoner on their territory... Optimus wasn't looking forward to it.

Alright. He would try to be more open-minded and learn more. After all, the more he knew about his captors, the better were his chances of dealing with them. Megatron realized that when he bargained with Optimus back in Trypticon; now Optimus could use the same tactic. Only more subtly.

And then he'd see where it would go from there.

When they left the building in the morning, the first thing Optimus felt was cold. The portable generator (that Megatron now had tucked safely in his subspace) kept their little room warm, but the outside world had changed rapidly without them noticing. There was *frost* covering the trees and the city's ruins, cracking under Optimus and Lugnut's feet as they stepped out of the building.

"Wow, what in the name of the Allspark had happened?" Optimus gawked at his surroundings. "How could the seasons change so fast?" On Earth it took weeks for temperature to drop so much, and Cybertron's climate was rather stable.

"It can't be normal." Megatron squinted at the cloudy sky. "The weather never changed; whatever the cause for this is, it's not natural."

"Do you think..." Optimus reset his vocalizer. "Do you think it's because the planet was cyberformed?"

Megatron made a short pause, but when he began speaking again, his tone was sullen.

"I believe our tentacled hosts might have control over Quintessa's climate."

"You mean... *They're* altering it? On purpose?" Alright, that was frightening.

"Perhaps they grew frustrated with their inability to catch us, so they resorted to more drastic methods." Megatron shifted slightly, and Optimus heard his engine rumble louder, heating the frame. "Although the idea that they can control their own planet's climate is unsettling."

Optimus hummed an agreement. It was no wonder the Quintessons left their homeworld, if it was that butchered inside and out. And no wonder he didn't see any animals except for those octopus things; apparently, only they managed to adapt to artificial conditions of a planet turned into a humongous automated toy.

“As is the idea that they’d freeze entire Quintessa just to hunt us down,” he added, suppressing a shudder.

“All the more reason to get out of here as quickly as possible. Let’s go, Lugnut.” Megatron’s optics dimmed a little as he accessed the map on his HUD. “We’ll try to make it less than two weeks.”

“I will do my best, oh noble Megatron!” The warrior chuffed, accepting the new challenge, and began walking with such determination that Optimus had to practically run after him. He was already preparing himself for a tiresome race of a journey when Megatron’s voice reached his audials.

“Slow down, Lugnut. We don’t want Optimus Prime to fall behind.”

Optimus didn’t quite comprehend what was said at first. But then Lugnut’s pace did slow down, and the Prime could walk normally again; this was when realization struck.

“Um...” He tried to look over Lugnut’s shoulder, but Megatron didn’t seem to be interested in his reaction, so Optimus let it slip. He didn’t know what got him in Megatron’s good graces, but he definitely wasn’t going to complain.

During the next three solar cycles it was becoming colder and colder. The days were easier to bear, although additional heating increased the energy consumption rate; Lugnut had to hunt for the octopus creatures more often, and it proved to be more tedious, since the animals preferred to hide from cold in secluded spots and enter stasis, which made them harder to detect. The nights, however, turned out to be real trouble.

They couldn’t use the generator out of caution, and no matter how hard Optimus revved up his engine, lack of active movement and lower temperature rendered his attempts fruitless. The icy ground where he lied sucked every bit of warmth out of him, humidity caused ice to coat his joints as they cooled down, and waking up in the morning became harder every time. Cybertronians were durable creatures, forged to withstand the vacuum of outer space, but Optimus’s experience on Earth demonstrated that organic planets’ weather conditions could do to a mechanism things that no space trip would ever manage.

Finally, in the fourth evening Optimus decided that radical measures had to be applied. He had no idea why Lugnut and Megatron recharged separately when they could be snuggling with each other, but for now he didn’t really care; all he knew was that Megatron was large and warm, and right now Optimus would give up anything for a chance to nestle close to someone large and warm, even it was Megatron. So after he watched Lugnut settle his master on the ground and step away to look for his own place to spend the night, Optimus stood up and strode straight to the warlord.

“You know what? I’m freezing and I’ve had enough of this. Say whatever you wish, but I’m gonna recharge with you.”

Megatron blinked, perplexed, looking up at Optimus for a change.

“What?”

“You’re freezing too.” Optimus saw how the warlord shivered when Lugnut let go of him. “It’s only reasonable if we recharge together, we’ll all be warmer.”

“We don’t do that.” Megatron’s face betrayed something suspiciously akin to uncertainty, and if it was a different situation, Optimus would definitely congratulate himself with this achievement.

“‘We’ as in ‘we Decepticons’? You’re weird.” Optimus shook his head. “You are ready to lick energon off each other, but you don’t share body heat? What about your praised ‘survival’?”

“It *is* about survival. Recharging together is unsafe.”

“Right, okay, I get it.” Optimus rubbed his forehead. Getting stranded on an alien planet with two Decepticons wasn’t supposed to resemble dealing with sparklings. “But do you really think Lugnut will stab you in your sleep?”

“...No,” Megatron agreed after a pause; Lugnut’s “Never!” finalized the impression of unruly newsparks.

“Do you think *I* would do it?”

“You might.” Megatron’s optics narrowed a little, and when Optimus opened his mouth to retort, the warlord raised his palm. “Fine, I got your point. Let’s try the Autobot way.” He spread his thighs and nodded to Optimus. “Get over here.”

The Prime wanted to protest at first (he was thinking more of recharging side by side with Megatron, not between his legs, for Allspark’s sake!), but then he imagined himself surrounded by all that wonderful heat... Oh, screw the propriety, and if Megatron wanted to frag him, he’d have done it already. Without further ado, Optimus spun around and slumped to the ground, back against Megatron’s abdominal plates. The warlord’s arms slithered around his waist, pulling him closer, and Optimus squirmed, trying to find a position where the angles of their respective frames wouldn’t bump into each other.

He had to reposition himself again, though, when Megatron called for Lugnut and the warrior scooped them both into his lap.

Optimus cursed silently when he sensed his armor being scratched, but finally the commotion stopped, and... And it was actually quite nice. Optimus didn’t touch Lugnut, Megatron’s frame separating them successfully (*the lucky bastard*, Optimus thought grimly, *got himself the best spot*), but soon warmth began spreading through his frame, and the Prime sighed in bliss. Yes; this was worth any discomfort.

“I’ll watch first,” Megatron murmured to Lugnut, his voice coming from above but also resonating in his chest. At least he was uneasy too; Optimus could read it in the warlord’s EM field, washing over him with constant alertness, checking, scanning, waiting for a strike.

What a horrible, ugly life, Optimus thought to himself with strange, nearly disdainful pity. Robbing yourself of a chance to sleep next to a loved one, of simple joys like trust and tranquility. Who even does that?

Maybe the ‘cons weren’t monsters; maybe they were just emotionally defective.

Oh well, it was the ‘cons’ problem. Optimus had his own problem solved, and he was going to have a very pleasant recharge cycle. Offlining his optics, he allowed his head to rest against Megatron’s chest and shut his higher processes down.

I know, I know it's cliché, but I'll never get tired of iiiiiiit~

Part II, Chapter 5

Exiting the recharge mode the next morning was both incredibly satisfying and awkward. For the first time since the start of their journey Optimus woke up before the 'cons; he felt snug and well-rested, but the fact that he felt that way around *Megatron* of all people only added to his mortification.

Oh, and Lugnut was there too. But for some reason Optimus stopped regarding him as that big of a threat after getting Megatron's approval. Lugnut was careful with his master's toys.

...Yeah. Not a happy thought. Optimus turned his head to get a view of Megatron's sleeping face; in the dim light of early morning dusk and the blue glow of Optimus's optics it seemed ethereal, almost serene. But when Optimus stirred slightly, trying to change the pose a little, Megatron's optics instantly lit up.

Optimus gasped at the violent lash of the warlord's EM field, but then a huge palm closed around his neck, blocking the flow of energon, and his gasp turned into a choked wheeze. The grip quickly loosened, and Optimus massaged his poor throat cables, glaring at Megatron.

"Don't startle me again," the warlord grumbled, his words tinted with regret. Optimus supposed this was the only apology he was getting.

"Forget it," he muttered, doing a short medical check to ensure there was no real damage. This only reaffirmed that all Decepticons were crazy.

Behind Megatron's back Lugnut was waking up too, albeit slowly. It appeared that even for the crazy Decepticons getting out of a warm pile into the icy air wasn't listed among the pleasures. Or maybe Lugnut didn't want to let go of what was, quite possibly, a dream fulfillment for him: an opportunity to hold his precious glorious leader in his mighty embrace.

The image of Lugnut and Megatron posing dramatically, slapped on a cover of a cheesy romance novel, flashed in Optimus's mind, and he giggled. Megatron raised an optic ridge at him, but didn't ask anything. Instead he pushed Optimus away like some sort of diseased insect, which was also kind of funny.

"If we're going to do it again," and Megatron's grave tone suggested that they were going to do it again, "and you wake up first, call me over the commlink. If you move without warning, I might hurt you."

Ah, the joys of belonging to the race that doesn't cuddle. But what bugged Optimus was a different issue.

"Why?" he asked, standing up.

"Why what?"

"Why do you care whether you hurt me or not? Why do you even need me as your prisoner? I remember Earth." Optimus had to step back and throw back his head as Lugnut scooped Megatron in his arms and rose to his feet, lifting the warlord. "We had to join forces against Starscream and his clones, but you used me as a living shield and then threw aside like trash! What changed now? Why save me from the scraplet pit, why keep me around now, when you have Lugnut?"

"Because back then you were a nobody; just some Autobot that stood in my way." Megatron

observed him calmly, a stark contrast to Optimus's outburst. "Now you are an enemy worth respecting. An enemy whose name I won't forget... *Optimus Prime*."

A shiver ran down Optimus's spine, but he stood with his back completely straight as Lugnut stomped past him. He... shouldn't feel so euphoric and smug at the notion that the Decepticon lord considered him a personal enemy. This was dangerous; this promised torture and pain if he was to be brought to Decepticon territory as a prisoner.

Then why did it seem like a badge of honor?

"Are you coming, Autobot?" Lugnut grunted from the edge of the clearing. Optimus snapped out of his stupor and hurried after him.

Despite everything, Megatron seemed to appreciate the heating Optimus provided, so in the evening he opened his arms without protest.

Megatron also devised a way to make himself feel more content: after Optimus settled down between his legs, the Decepticon gripped his wrists firmly, holding them down.

"Hey!" Optimus wriggled and managed to turn his head enough to lock optics with the warlord. "I thought we had established that I wasn't going to attack you in your sleep!"

"Then there is no reason for you to object, isn't it?" Megatron replied in a perfectly mellow manner.

Optimus growled under his breath. He didn't want to be kicked out of the 'con pile, and he was sort of flattered, to be honest (the great Lord of the Decepticons finding him dangerous and all), but Megatron's rough touches made him aware of how tiny and helpless he was. He was not an untamed animal that the 'cons could manhandle to their sparks' content! Yet this was how he felt right now: like a small Earthian dog that barked at a giant wolf while shaking in fear.

He tried to sit still. He tried! But somehow it was harder to fall into recharge with Megatron's hands restraining him so blatantly; Optimus's core was overheating (which was a joke on its own, considering their surroundings), and he couldn't stop thinking about their encounters in prison. Megatron's mouth on his fingers, sucking, licking, *teasing*... And now this. Megatron made it look like an attempt to ensure safety, but Optimus knew the mech well enough to be suspicious of all his actions. What if Megatron was messing with him again?

Not to mention that this, too, was a popular scenario in those porn videos. Evil Decepticon overpowering a virtuous Autobot captive, securing the victim's hand above their head and leaving them vulnerable and flustered and ripe for the taking...

The young Prime bit his lip; he seriously feared that his face was going to steam in the frosty air, which would be terribly humiliating. The heat of Megatron's frame, so welcome at first, was becoming uncomfortable. Optimus opened all his vents wide, squirming...

And Megatron bit his antenna.

It wasn't too hard a bite – just a warning, a graze of fangs against the sensitive tip, but for Optimus it felt like electric shocks coursed through his body, making his servos freeze and his spark bounce in its casing. It didn't help when Megatron snarled with his dental plates clasped around Optimus's finial:

“Be still.”

The low rumble reverberated in his chest, sending vibrations through both of their frames and through the antenna. Optimus whimpered, clenched his fists... and stopped moving. Finally the pressure on his poor finial disappeared, and the cool air breezed over it, making the oversensitized tip tingle.

He was burning, every cog and every fuel line set aflame by shame and something Optimus refused to name. This was unacceptable. This couldn't happen; wasn't allowed to happen! Not to him! That damned voice, it was all because of that voice! Optimus drew his EM field as close to his plating as possible, but at this distance it was futile: Megatron doubtlessly experienced his turmoil as if it was transmitted straight to him.

Yet, to Optimus's bewilderment, the Decepticon didn't react to it. The only emotion the warlord's own EM field betrayed was good-natured amusement, and, as insulting as it was, it was much better than Optimus's expectations.

In fact, this was one of the most appealing traits of the Decepticons that Optimus had discovered by recharging with them: they had surprisingly nice EM fields – especially Megatron. His field was wide and strong, and when he wasn't shouting battle cries or fighting, it was also very stable – an even, thick bubble of confidence and imperturbability. It was strange, since Autobot EM fields were always changing, always fluent, alight with free-flowing moods. Being inside Megatron's bubble had a soothing effect, which could sound absurd, but somehow managed to be true.

Well, when Megatron wasn't biting on Optimus's sensitive parts, of course.

The Prime counted to twenty and forced his strained body to slowly relax (the warlord's EM field helped). Optimus just needed to clear his mind and go into recharge mode; if Megatron wanted to hold him in place, let him. It was him who had problems with recharging next to others, not Optimus.

Several solar cycles went by in the same routine: they walked during the day and snuggled with each other during the night. The temperature continued to drop; sometimes it snowed, but the travelers' worst enemy was ice. It coated tree trunks and bushes, twigs bending down under the weight, it settled on the mechs' faces and protruding parts. Components in Megatron's maimed legs, devoid of energon circulation and warmth it brought with it, became fragile, pieces cracking and falling off when hit by accident.

Several times they heard drones flying overhead. At first Optimus was afraid what could happen if they had heat vision, but if that was the case, the forest's canopy protected them.

On the tenth day the landscape began changing. The woods remained just as tall and thick, but large rocks started appearing between the trees, growing in size and quantity until they became rock formations. According to the map, a mountain ridge was nearby, but their way lay along it (which was good, because crossing the mountains would doubtlessly leave them bare for any airborne enemy to detect). But the greatest thing was that, as the travelers were looking for a place to spend a night, Lugnut spotted a spacious niche in the stones, well-protected from three sides and from above. After putting Megatron down in the corner Lugnut excused himself and vanished in the forest – only to return with a huge boulder on his shoulders. The ground trembled as he dropped the boulder in front of the niche, shutting the exit – and then Optimus figured out what it promised. For the first time since the ancient city they had a real shelter; a place that hid them from prying eyes, which meant...

Megatron took out the energy generator.

Optimus optics lit up, just like the lamps on the generator as it switched on. His mood was rapidly improving, and even the Decepticons' presence couldn't thwart it; who knew that just a little light and warmth could bring so much joy?

Meanwhile Megatron crossed his arms and legs demonstratively, his every fiber nearly screaming: "Stay away!" Lugnut also made a show of settling down in the farthest corner from both of his companions, snorting in Optimus's direction. The Prime held back a chuckle; it was as if he could scare two big bad Decepticons by just asking for a hug. He wasn't complaining, though.

Megatron took the first shift, as always. Lugnut immediately offlined his optics, as quick to fall asleep as ever, leaving Optimus and Megatron to sit across of each other and contemplate the glowing generator. Optimus had a sense of *déjà vu*: only about a week ago they were under the similar conditions, talking about Decepticon traditions and Megatron's past. Were they bound to find themselves in such situations?

Maybe it was the Allspark's providence giving Optimus chances to do something about this accursed war.

"Megatron?" Optimus began unsurely, tensing slightly when the warlord's red gaze focused on him. "I, um... Thought about what you had said. About Cybertron before the war."

"Did you now?" Megatron questioned lazily.

"Yes. I mean... There is a lot of bad blood between our peoples."

"You don't say."

Optimus winced.

"No, please, listen. I know we've been at war for too long, and both Autobots and Decepticons lost a lot." *I lost a friend*, he wanted to add, but stopped himself. "Look, what I meant to say is... Every war has to end sooner or later. What do you think must happen for our war to end?"

Megatron leaned on the wall, optics narrowed into two red slits.

"The way I want it to end is by wiping the Autobots out and retaking Cybertron. In your case, I suppose, it's the complete destruction of all Decepticons."

Optimus gritted his dental plates.

"And if to be serious?"

"I am being serious." Optimus shivered; suddenly the stony shelter felt cold, despite the generator. "I will not stop until every trace of Autobot race is erased from the face of Cybertron. Your superiors, I'm certain, have just as much resolve."

Optimus could only gape at the warlord, vocalizer clicking idly. Somehow... He had always treated these promises as empty words, an exaggeration to rally the troops, but hearing them spoken with cold determination...

It was wrong. It was madness! How could anyone wish for an annihilation of an entire nation?!

"Why?" It came out almost pained. "*Why would you want such a thing?*"

“Because I want to live,” Megatron said simply. “Because I want my people to live, so that I could rule them. You Autobots, for all your declarations that your duty is to protect life, will never allow Decepticons to live freely. It’s either us or you, simple as that.”

“But we don’t need to destroy each other for this!” Lugnut budged at his raised voice, and Optimus toned it down. “We can negotiate, find a peaceful solution... Cybertron is our common homeworld, I’m sure we can...”

He was interrupted by Megatron’s quiet laughter.

“Peace?” He grinned, baring his fangs, which stole even the guise of mirth from that grin. “We tried peace before; it didn’t work out. No, Cybertron might be large, but there is only enough place for one race on it.”

Megatron didn’t intend it to sound bitter, perhaps, but this was what Optimus sensed: bitterness. And old, long-nurtured wrath.

“Do you really believe there can be no peace between our peoples?” It even sounded strange. Optimus had never thought someone could be truly convinced in such a thing. The Autobots were builders, creators by nature; peace was one of the highest values. Peace was the natural state of the universe! And yet here sat Megatron, the leader of a slaggin’ *nation*, shaking his head.

“No, Optimus Prime. We are warriors; for us peace means death. Especially the peace you Autobots present.”

There was faint weariness in his tone, and Optimus reached for that fleeting impression like for a saving straw.

“Megatron, peace won’t necessarily result in... the sort of life you had before the war. We can have negotiations, find compromises, solutions! Peace treaty doesn’t mean you’ll be put into flight locks again.”

“You are young and naïve if this is what you really believe.” Megatron’s expression hardened.

“Times might change, but people do not. There will always be the same urges driving them: ambition, fear, greed, hate. History has a tendency of repeating itself, and I swore to myself that I will leave nothing for history to repeat.”

Optimus balled his hands into fists.

“You call me young and naïve, but you know what’s *your* problem, Megatron? You can’t let go of the past.” Optimus met the warlord’s glare boldly, for once bent on finishing what he wanted to say. “You allow your past to haunt you and to control the course of your life. You clutch at your past and persuade yourself that it validates your every action. You are so in love with your image as a self-righteous freedom fighter that you refuse to see the possibilities!”

To his ultimate shock, Megatron didn’t argue.

“Our past shapes us into what we are,” he uttered softly. “We cannot change that. If you are so in favor of letting go of the past, why don’t you do it yourself? You are still plagued by your guilt of leaving Elita-1 behind – so much that you let your so-called ‘friend’ trample over you and use you. He sold you to the Quints, and I bet he did so gladly, since you were stealing his glory and being a competent leader while he was not.”

For a klik there was silence.

“It is hard... to overcome your past and move along,” Optimus spoke quietly. “But I have a question for you, Megatron. If you don’t believe in change, then why do you keep on advising me to stand up for myself?”

Megatron just stared at him for several long, long moments – until finally his lips curved in a genuine smile, and he shook his head, relaxing against the wall.

“Well played, Optimus.” Red optics twinkled. “It would seem I have found a worthy opponent in battle of words just as in battle of arms.”

They sat like that for a while, the atmosphere weirdly cozy and tranquil. The generator’s orange light only increased that impression, and Optimus realized that somehow he was... at peace. It was a small place, just a bare niche on an Allspark-forsaken planet with nothing but an energy generator to potentially fight for... But here, in this tiny space, an Autobot and a Decepticon did find peace.

“I wish you were a Decepticon,” Megatron murmured suddenly.

Optimus jerked his head up, mouth agape.

“Wh-what..? Why?!”

The warlord looked him straight in the optics, face uncharacteristically melancholic.

“I am old, Optimus Prime. I don’t plan on dying anytime soon, but I don’t have any illusions about my mortality. One day a lucky shot or a blade’s strike will end me, and your victory is only another proof of this. What saddens me is that I have nobody to entrust my Decepticons. Strika is a good commander, but she doesn’t have it in her to play political games – and she doesn’t want it; Shockwave is smart and loyal, but he’s a loner and has no leadership abilities. Starscream... seemed promising once, but not for long. You, on the other hand,” Megatron shook his head again. “You do what you know is the right thing to do, no matter who says what, and you are able to make your subordinates love you.” He smirked at Optimus’s embarrassment. “Don’t blush, this is a quality every great leader needs. Fear, force and logic are good assets, but for people to die for you they must love you. I have to confess, when I look at you I feel twice as old – but also very, very angry. If only you were born with red optics instead of blue...” He sighed. “You’d make the right kind of Second-in-command – and one day, a worthy heir.”

Optimus could only gawk at the stone floor under his feet, his cheeks aflame and spark racing in his chest. He didn’t know how to react; he *couldn’t* react! This was...

This made him want to cry.

“Of course, you can always defect.”

That suggestion made Optimus to glance at Megatron again, but the warlord’s small smile told him that it was a joke. Not without a hidden offer, but a joke nevertheless.

The corners of Optimus’s mouth rose up, although it turned out a bit sad.

“You know I won’t do that.”

“I know.”

They didn’t say a word afterwards.

Part II, Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“We’ve got about a day or two before we reach the city.” Megatron glanced at Optimus over Lugnut’s shoulder. “In case we do find what we seek, what can you do well regarding spaceships?”

Optimus took a short pause to think. After their talk about peace Megatron began striking conversations with him, and the Prime found himself really enjoying them. They didn’t discuss anything crucial, carefully avoiding potentially touchy subjects with unspoken unanimity, but small, safe topics like books and technics brightened Optimus’s days. The atmosphere warmed up so much that Optimus even dared to get himself a new makeshift club; Megatron only smirked when he saw it, but didn’t make any objections.

“I’m not that much of a pilot,” Optimus answered. “Autobot ships usually fly on autopilot. I can use manual controls, but I didn’t have much experience. I’m rather good at shooting asteroids out of the way, though.” It offered at least some entertainment (and stress relief) when Optimus and his team were travelling from one broken space bridge to another.

“What about faster moving targets?”

“Them too,” Optimus grinned, for once proud of himself. He was at the top of his class in sharpshooting.

“A gunner, then.” Megatron nodded. “Good. We’ll need one, even if we pass the hunter net.”

This made Optimus avert his optics. The realization that very soon they will possibly leave Quintessa should’ve pleased him, but instead it loomed over him, filling him with anxiety.

Before he was just glad to have avoided being eaten by scarplets and to get off the planet soon, but as they approached their goal doubt began creeping in. The Quintessons named his and Megatron’s demise as a condition of their fleet’s withdrawal from the Autobot space. But now that their execution failed... What if the Quints decide to retaliate? What if they attacked again, demanded reparations?

What if they declared that, were Optimus to appear in the Autobot Commonwealth, he had to be handed over immediately?

The longer Optimus mused about it, the harder it became to move his feet. He escaped imminent death, but if he managed to escape from Quintessa too... Would it really be for the better? What would he do if he learned that the Quintessons were threatening innocents again?

The honorable thing would be to surrender. Right?

Optimus coughed, trying to get rid of the lump in his throat. If he did surrender, all that he’d accomplished would be freeing Megatron and allowing him to return to his troops. Every Autobot would curse Optimus’s name when they learn about it, and they would be right. Besides, the Quints wanted both him and Megatron; they probably wouldn’t be satisfied by getting only him. Should he make sure the Quints catch Megatron too?

This thought made his insides contract. It didn’t matter what cold logic dictated; Optimus couldn’t do that. It was disgusting; it was betrayal. His old military programming rebelled briefly, flooding

his HUD with outtakes from the Autobot code and manifests, but Optimus deleted them without a second thought. It was Sentinel who liked doing things by the book, and look how he turned out. No, when it came to morals, Optimus was going to trust his own spark.

Memories of Sentinel engulfed him; Optimus tried to chase them away, but in vain. They hurt, those memories: Sentinel dismissing him condescendingly, Sentinel threatening him with blackmail, Sentinel berating his friends... Why had Optimus never recognized it? Why did he accept all of this?

Sentinel sold him to the Quintessons. He did the right thing, Optimus never stopped telling himself that, he did it to avoid a war and save thousands of lives... But it hurt. It hurt so much!

Optimus didn't really have anywhere to go, did he? He couldn't go back to Cybertron. He couldn't go to Earth: Bumblebee, Sari and professor Sumdac would greet him with open arms, but Earth would be the first place where Optimus's enemies would look for him. He didn't want to put his friends in danger.

Once again Optimus found himself looking at Lugnut's back with thinly veiled envy. The Decepticons were lucky. Exiled they might be, but they had a home to return to, home where they'll be met with joy. It wasn't fair. Autobots were all about community and helping each other, yet an Autobot was the one who was an outcast, while vile, selfish, individualistic Decepticons were returning to a welcoming crowd.

But at least someone would get a little happiness.

So Optimus continued walking without any attempts to give away their position to the searching drones. He should stay with the 'cons and escape with them... And after that he'd steal the plasma dynamic thruster and transwarp away from his captors. This will help the Autobot cause, at least. Then Optimus will find out what's going on and decide what to do next.

By the middle of the day they found themselves walking along a rocky ridge that grew higher with every hic. Nobody paid special attention to that – after all, rock formations were frequent due to the closeness of mountains – but when the trees suddenly parted, Optimus couldn't hold back a gasp.

They stood on the bank of a river so wide that the woods on the other side seemed tiny. It was covered in ice all over, and to the left, where the rocks towered over the tallest trees, there was a colossal frozen waterfall.

It spanned the entire breadth the river – a ribbed wall of white, enormous co-joined pillars rising one by one, trapped in time by the Quintessons' wicked arts. Just seeing it made Optimus feel small and humble, but he wasn't given much time to awe.

“Do we risk a flight?” Megatron's voice broke the silence.

“Too dangerous. We don't know if the searching drones are nearby.” In the last two weeks Optimus learned to fear the open sky.

“We have to cross the river somehow. The city must be on the other side.”

Optimus rubbed his chin in thought.

“There is sometimes a free space behind the waterfall. We can check if it's there.”

Megatron seemed skeptic.

“We’ll be lucky if that free space is unobstructed all the way from one bank to another.” Then his scowl softened a little. “We might check it at least.”

Fortunately, it appeared like Optimus was right: when the three travelers approached the waterfall, they indeed found a passage beyond the icy curtain. It didn’t look friendly, though: Optimus flexed his fingers nervously as he peeked inside. The tunnel was long, its end impossible to discern from where they stood; the stone foundation of the passage was coated in ice too. Dim light that passed through the frozen wall of water turned greenish, illuminating the shimmering surfaces, and the tunnel looked otherworldly, like a path for the dead.

But it was large enough to be accessible for all of them. Megatron frowned; he obviously didn’t want to go inside, but intended to do so nevertheless.

“It’s not that different from a mine,” he said at last. “We’ll try it. Lugnut, let’s go.”

But no matter how much they all tried to show bravery, their steps were slow and careful. Even Lugnut walked with uncharacteristic caution, and he clung to Megatron just a bit too strongly. Optimus didn’t blame him; in all honesty, he’d have been grateful for a chance to clutch at someone’s hand as they moved down the winding route. Every second he was painfully aware of the immense mass of frozen water above him, and when he made a mistake and glanced back – only to see no trace of the entrance – his fuel tanks made a nauseating leap.

Yet for now they were lucky: they stumbled upon a thin column or two separating the passage, but the way was never blocked completely. Optimus held on to the hope of nearing deliverance from this frosty tomb – until they heard a muffled, all too-familiar sound of small flight engines outside.

They stopped instantly, without any prompting, and all three EM fields flared with panic. The drones; searching drones were right next to them, separated only by the waterfall!

[Not a sound, and don’t move,] Megatron ordered over the commlink, but Optimus didn’t really need additional advice: he was already unmoving, frozen like a part of the tunnel. His spark was pounding heavily, and Optimus fought an irrational desire to tear it out – just to make it quiet, to stop that deafening thrumming!

The once turbulent river had too much air in the water, which made the ice opaque; because of that neither Optimus could see the Quintesson drones, nor did they detect the fugitives. And then, in the sluggish, overly extended moment of horror, strange detachment took over him. What if he made a sound? He could start shouting and hitting the ice; no way the drones would miss that. They’d be found and brought back before the Quintesson court (if the Decepticons didn’t kill Optimus first, that is), and the Quints would get what they want. They would leave Cybertron alone, and Optimus would fulfill his duty before his people. There wouldn’t be any doubts, anything to mull over.

But that one moment passed, and Optimus returned to his senses. No; whatever came over him, it was madness, a sick temptation. They didn’t run away only to be caught again. And Optimus couldn’t betray his companions. Decepticons they might be, but nobody deserved the Quintessons’ inane justice; nobody deserved death in a scraplet pit. Gradually, quietly he ex-vented, and the violent beating of his spark eased a little.

And just like in response to it, the sound of drone engines faded away. Ten kliks went by in silence, until finally the Decepticons dared to move.

[Seems like they left,] Megatron commed. [Let’s get out of here.]

They didn't face any other problems; when they exited the tunnel, the horizon was clear.

This day had another surprise prepared for them: in the late afternoon they stumbled upon an entrance to a cave, broad and well-hidden under a rocky overhang.

"What do you think?" Optimus activated his headlights, examining the cave. Apparently, what they saw was only the first chamber, a dark hole in the farthest wall presumably leading deeper. "How about staying here for the night?"

"Good idea," Megatron gestured to Lugnut, and the huge Decepticon bent down a little to step inside. "We should check what's in there and find a comfortable place far enough from the opening."

Second and third "rooms" didn't present anything new except for groups of stalactites and stalagmites crisscrossed by metal formations that seemed to grow through the rock, piercing the graceful columns like thick needles. It looked unnatural and, in Optimus's opinion, rather unsettling; he was glad to leave those chambers. There were frozen puddles of water and icicles here and there, but as they ventured deeper into the cave, it became dry.

Finally the tunnel led them into a large hall with smooth walls and floor devoid of rubble and ice; here the cave ended. It seemed like a perfect place to make a camp, and the voluminous round-shaped lump of metal in the middle of the chamber could provide them all with some privacy...

But then the metal lump stirred.

Ten segmented tentacles crawled from under it, propping it up, and with a creeping dread Optimus realized that it was a giant relative of the octopus-things they encountered before. But while Optimus and his Decepticon companions could eat those creatures, this one was ready to eat them.

All three of them reacted at the same time. Lugnut dropped Megatron on the ground rather unceremoniously, but the warlord didn't even curse; instead he aimed his blaster instantly and fired at the beast. Optimus, armed only with a club, dashed to the side, keeping the lights on the creature and trying to come up with some ideas. Meanwhile Lugnut bent even lower, the compartments on his back opened – but then Megatron's yell resounded around the cave:

"Lugnut! No missiles and no P.O.K.E.! You'll bring the ceiling down on us!"

Lugnut followed the order without objecting; closing his rocket launchers, he bellowed and charged, hammering into the octopus's humongous form. Thick tentacles wrapped around him, constricting, trying to crush his armor. Laser shots flashed beyond the writhing mass of appendages, but it was futile: the octopus's metal shell proved to be too dense.

Its underbelly, on the other hand, could be more vulnerable, if it was anything like its smaller relatives.

"Lugnut! Pull it!" Optimus ran around the creature, approaching it from behind, and rammed into its body. If they managed to drive the octopus closer to Megatron, so that the warlord could shoot it from below...

What Optimus didn't consider was the fact that, even though the octopus was distracted by Lugnut, it had appendages all around it.

A tentacle grabbed him, giant claw scraping at the chestplate, and pushed him down. The grip only

tightened as Optimus struggled, and he heard his plating creak under the pressure. He was being dragged underneath the creature, and it could've been good if he had a weapon, but for now Optimus could only stare in terror as the armored shutters at the octopus's belly opened, revealing a prodigious curved beak. He reacted before he could think: he pushed his club between the mighty jaws, blocking them.

It began bending immediately, and it was obvious it could break every second – when someone grabbed Optimus's collar, and another force pulled him back to the floor and away. He yelped, but then Megatron's voice roared over his audial: "Don't move!" – and hot air singed his cheek, laser shot hitting the very center of the octopus's open maw right before the club shattered to pieces and the beak closed.

The creature let out a hoarse howling sound, something inside it gurgled, the tentacles' grip became unbearably tight – and loosened.

Then the octopus's entire mass fell right on Optimus and Megatron.

Lugnut freed them in a klik, rolling the carcass off them in childlike panic.

"Master! Are you okay? I'm sorry, oh glorious one, I should've held it..."

"It's alright... Lugnut," Megatron muttered, blinking owlshly. Optimus groaned, resetting his visual sensors, and noticed that he was lying half-sprawled over Megatron with the warlord's arm wrapped around his torso. Only one of Optimus's headlamps survived the battle, and in its flickering light he saw the thin cloud of dust settling down and Megatron's crooked smile. The Prime couldn't help but smile in return. They were alive; *they were alive!* Something radiant and gleeful was bursting out of his spark like rays of sunlight, and suddenly it became crystal clear to Optimus:

He didn't want to die, not here and not in front of the Quintessons.

He wanted to live.

Megatron stopped smiling openly, but that smile still lurked in the corners of his mouth as Lugnut helped Optimus to his feet. It should've bothered the Prime, perhaps, but it didn't.

"Well, at least we have enough fuel for several days," Megatron commented, watching the smoke rise from the seams of the creature's shell. "If the laser fire didn't burn it."

"There should be some left, my liege." Lugnut began tearing the carcass apart – with much more effort than the smaller octopuses required. "I will get you every drop there is, oh bold and victorious leader!"

"Its armor is very strong." Megatron scrutinized the corpse like it personally insulted him, and then turned to Optimus. "I suggest you find a suitable piece of the shell and use it as a new club or a sword."

Optimus stared at the warlord, but was soon forced to look away, since he wasn't sure he could keep his face properly neutral. He was being offered a weapon, but with what he learned about Decepticon traditions so far, it was essentially an offer of peace. And now he was blushing. He didn't even understand *why* he was blushing! Cursing himself inwardly, Optimus preferred to follow the advice; at least this way all Megatron could see would be his back.

They dined on the creatures' energon; one unharmed fuel tank Lugnut sealed and hid in his subspace for later. The portable generator was switched on again, and it was time to settle down and prepare for recharge, but Optimus found himself unable to do that. His EM field was seething with energy, the rush of excitement after the battle making his spark swirl. This was probably their last night on Quintessa; tomorrow they will reach the spaceport, find a ship and leave this planet. Of course, there was a possibility that they made a mistake and the spaceport wasn't there, or that all ships would be in such condition that repairs would take an eternity... But it still felt like the last night.

Perhaps tomorrow Optimus would have to decide what to do next.

His good mood evaporated instantly, as if swept away by chilly wind. Leaving Quintessa meant an end of... all this. Of the simplicity of walking to a goal, of recharging in a warm pile, surrounded by stable EM fields, of conversations with Megatron.

Of teasing. Of the attention. Optimus... got accustomed to it; but if they would be successful with their escape and Optimus would be successful with his own, he'd be alone once more.

He shivered and hugged his knees, forcing back any sound that threatened to fall from his lips. What had happened to him? Only several weeks ago he was content with his life, prepared to sacrifice himself for the Autobot cause if necessary; where did that bilious, bitter feeling of *betrayal* come from?

The mech he considered a friend treated him like a bargain chip. After years of bossing him around and punishing him for something that was Sentinel's fault as much as Optimus's, Sentinel separated him from his team, condemned him for helping the Jettwins, accused him of coercion and then cast him aside at the first opportunity.

And now Cybertron was out of reach for Optimus. He couldn't contact his friends out of fear of bringing Sentinel's – or the Quintessons' – wrath upon their heads.

He felt forsaken by everyone and awfully, utterly alone.

I wish you were a Decepticon.

Pain in his chest became excruciating, and Optimus shut his optics. For a brief, fleeting moment he wondered what he would've been like if he indeed was born a Decepticon. In his mind he saw himself – tall and darkly colored, purple and black maybe, with red optics and proud posture. Optimus of the Decepticons, Megatron's Second-in-command.

He'd have had to watch out for Starscream, then. A small smile found its way to his lips, but the vision evanesced as quickly as it came. No; it was not him, could never be.

Automatically his optics darted to Megatron. Neither he, nor Lugnut were preparing for sleep, and the warlord seemed to be contemplating something as he suckled on a fuel line from a leftover tentacle chunk. He was always so unfazed, so reserved... With a tinge of tiredness and alarming indifference, perhaps, but the Prime couldn't help but admire it.

What did he even see in Optimus?

Driven by an unexpected impulse, the Prime stood up and marched to the Decepticon lord. Megatron raised his gaze at him lazily.

“Yes, Optimus Prime?”

“Can I talk to you?” Optimus blurted out, keeping his assertive demeanor. He couldn’t back off now; it was possible he’d never get another chance.

“Sure.” Megatron leaned at the wall, finding a more comfortable pose, and put the severed tentacle away.

“In private.”

“Oh.” Optimus didn’t quite get what Megatron meant with that “oh”, but what counted was that the warlord complied. “Lugnut, the first shift would be yours tonight. Stand on guard near the exit, so we aren’t ambushed here.”

“Yes, my liege!” Lugnut jumped to his feet and saluted. “Please call me if you need anything, I’m ever ready to serve you, oh wise and noble Megatron! I...”

“Lugnut. *Go.*”

“Yes, my lord!” And with that said, the warrior was gone.

Megatron turned to Optimus again.

“Well? What did you wish to talk about?”

“What do you want of me?”

“Pardon?” Megatron raised an optic ridge.

Optimus dropped on the ground in front of him, feeling a bit foolish just standing there, and folded his legs.

“All that stuff you do. Licking.” He gestured to the piece of a tentacle. “Biting my antenna. And don’t pretend you weren’t aware of what you were doing, I’m not dumb.”

“Of course you aren’t.” Optimus half-expected Megatron to smirk, but, to his relief, the warlord’s face remained completely serious. “I did it because I enjoyed it, and you seemed to enjoy it too.”

“So it’s not a revenge for what happened in Trypticon?”

This time Megatron did smirk.

“You started it, Optimus Prime. I just... joined in.”

“‘Joined in’,” Optimus snorted, but it came out light-hearted. “This game can be played forever, you know. It’s not very efficient.”

Megatron’s mien turned sullen.

“Contrary to popular belief, I don’t go around raping every bot that caught my eye. Besides, close relations are pretty... unsafe for one who holds my post.”

“Yet you allowed me to carry a weapon,” Optimus said quietly. “And recharge beside you.”

“Let’s say I have some trust in your ideals,” Megatron replied just as softly.

Optimus’s spark skipped a beat.

“You... trust me?”

“A little.” Megatron tilted his head, expression unreadable. “To a certain extent.”

I wish you were a Decepticon.

Optimus lowered his head, staring at his own knees. He couldn't be what Megatron wanted him to be, and the warlord seemed to understand it. Optimus was an Autobot.

He wanted to live.

Optimus bit his lip, overwhelmed by a tide of emotions he couldn't control; he felt his optics heat up, ready to start sparking, but held back the urge to cry. Today he faced death twice: first standing in the frozen tunnel with only a fragile screen of ice separating him from the Quintesson drones; later, lying on the floor under a hungry beast attempting to feast on him. Now he was seized by a powerful desire he had never experienced before: to live. He was lost, forlorn, terribly lonely – and he wished, if only for one night, to make it all go away. To be accepted. To be wanted.

He *was* wanted.

Slowly, as if coming to terms with something he couldn't name, Optimus raised his gaze at Megatron again. Neither moved, neither uttered a word, as if they were afraid to break the moment – but then Optimus spotted a couple of purple stains on Megatron's chestplate.

“I never returned the favor, didn't I?” Optimus muttered, leaning forward. He had to stand on one knee and placed his hands on Megatron's chest to keep the balance – and then he lapped up the energon tentatively, almost shyly.

He thought he heard Megatron's vents hitch, and the spark pulsed faster under his palms, so he grew bolder, timid sweeps of his tongue turning into proper licks. After his glossa collected the last drops, Optimus lifted his head, locking optics with the warlord; this time they were close to each other, too close. Megatron shifted – and Optimus jolted, raising his hand between their faces like in defense.

The Decepticon chuckled.

“What, your finger kisses again?” he asked. Optimus felt his cheeks heat up, abashed, and laughed too, if a bit nervously. He acted out of instinct, and...

And his finger kisses really were stupid.

Optimus put his hand down. He was exposed now, so open and unguarded – but it felt *right*. Enough with silly games, enough with running away. Optimus didn't know who moved first; all he knew was that the distance between them grew shorter – and finally their lips met.

Electric shocks run down Optimus's frame, shaking him; for a second he was disoriented, bedazzled by a flood of sensations that shouldn't, couldn't be caused by such a simple touch. It was the chastest of kisses, yet every nerve in Optimus's body was on fire, he felt everything too acutely – Megatron's lips on his, the softness, the warmth...

And then those lips moved, hot glossa flicked against his mouth, and Optimus trembled, fear and vicious longing he never knew he was capable of battling in his spark. He shouldn't do this! It was pure folly! It was treason! He was an Auto...

He *was* wanted.

I wish to live. The thought flamed in his mind, bright and scorching, and Optimus opened his mouth, diving into the kiss with all desperation that he carried inside for so long. He threw his arms around Megatron's neck, pulling him down, pulling him closer, welcoming his glossa and nearly begging him to ravage Optimus's mouth. His loneliness, his guilt, his hurt – all of this he poured into the kiss, and these things dissolved, freeing him, taking the burden off his shoulders. If only for one night, he wished to revel in being alive and wanted, with no concern for duty or the future. Their tongues touched, sliding against each other, and Optimus moaned into the kiss, answering with passion he never knew he possessed. Megatron's hand cupped the back of his helm, angling it, another hand lay on his waist. Optimus allowed it, allowed the Decepticon to arrange him as he saw fit, delighting in how small and pliant he was in Megatron's hold.

His own palms traveled down the larger frame, exploring the grey armor: scraplet bites, half-healed by self-repair, dents and scratches left after the crash and long way through the jungle, chaffed joints, unprotected from the elements... Megatron's body was a mess, and Optimus's frame wasn't any better, but for now he didn't care. That wide EM field surrounded him in a tingly cocoon and flared when the Prime's fingers delved into a seam; Megatron repaid him by rubbing his antenna.

“Ah!” Optimus broke the kiss and arched, charge cracking around his finial. It felt sharper than before, sharper than when Megatron actually bit him, and Optimus's fans were already running on maximum power, their whirr mixing with the deeper roar of Megatron's coolers. They locked optics again, and with a dawning finality Optimus realized: he was going to be fragged tonight. He had passed the point of no return; it was too late to run.

He didn't intend to run anyway.

As if trying to prove it, he reached out for a second kiss, but Megatron gave him just a peck, bowing to nibble at his neck cables. Optimus gasped, clutching at the warlord's helm, and then the walls moved before his sight, replaced by the ceiling, as the Prime found himself pushed to the ground gently. Megatron loomed over him, a mass of armor and raw power, but instead of being frightened Optimus was thrilled. When that huge palm trailed down his thin abdominal plating to stop on his interface panel, Optimus retracted it without hesitation.

Megatron rose to his knees to marvel at the results of his actions. His optics gleamed almost carmine with lust, and Optimus smiled in wonder as his spark raced like it was ready to jump out of its chamber. To know that he did it, that he was the cause and the center of such need was unbelievable.

Megatron must've guessed his condition, because he smiled in return and backed off slightly to bend down again, one finger trailing the rim of Optimus's port. “Alright,” he crooned, “let's... huh.” He paused, gazing at his discovery. “You're sealed.”

“Yeah...” Optimus squirmed. “Third wheel, remember?” he tried to joke. But the pause continued, until his face was burning up to the tips of his antennae. Sweet Allspark, please let Megatron *not* be one of those “your first time should be with the one you *truly love*” types! Stopping now would be humiliating!

But Megatron's initial astonishment appeared to pass, and his lips curved into a predatory smirk.

“Well, all the more reasons to make it *unforgettable*,” he purred, descending even lower – and Optimus cried out as the hot, wet glossa slithered against his port's opening. And then he could only arch his back and cry again and again, every swipe of that skilled, wonderful tongue sending tremors through his frame, turning his knees to jelly and his energon to molten metal. He sensed the tip of the glossa tickle the tender membrane of the seal, pushing at the soft mesh but never tearing it; it retreated for a moment to let the cool air brush against the heated nodes, and then

doubled its efforts. At one moment Optimus collected himself enough to glance downwards – and nearly overloaded from the sight alone. He had the living legend pleasure him. Megatron, the monster from the nursery rhymes and the villain from all the Academy books, was laving his port, and Optimus was going to give his seal to him. Somehow it filled him not with horror, but with pride.

He overloaded a moment later, too smitten and riled up to remember anything about self-restraint.

When he came back from his high, he felt like one big puddle of bliss, residual charge still crackling in his field. Megatron was watching him from between his thighs, and when Optimus's optics focused, the warlord told him curtly:

“Relax.”

Before Optimus could do anything, a blunt fingertip pressed to the lubricant-soaked seal and broke through it. Optimus opened his mouth, bracing for pain belatedly, but the dull sting wasn't worth screaming; then the invading digit hooked, there was a soft pop – and Megatron raised his hand triumphantly, a round patch of metal mesh stuck on his index finger like a bizarre ring.

“That's... it?” Optimus gawked at his torn seal. “I thought it was going to, you know, hurt more?”

“Four million years of practice,” Megatron replied smugly and laughed at Optimus's scandalized expression. “Well, not literally. But it doesn't really hurt if you're relaxed and your partner does the right trick.” He waved his finger. “Want to have it as a keepsake?”

“No!” Optimus propped himself on his elbows, flustered to the point his cheeks were tinted purple. “And, um, thanks, I guess,” he added, his initial boldness faltering.

“You're welcome.” Megatron flung the torn piece of mesh to the side. “Now where was I?”

One black palm came to rest on the ground next to Optimus's head as Megatron brought their lips together again. His other hand went back to probe at his port, and the Prime's thighs quivered when the sensor nodes at the rim were stimulated again. His port was sopping wet after the overload, making the sounds unbearably lewd, so Optimus preferred to hold on to the warlord's shoulders and concentrate on the kiss. But he had no control over his body anymore – not when the thick, hard digit entered him, mapping the insides of his port, setting alight the nodes and neural clusters that had never been touched before. And after the first finger was joined by the second, then the third, after they were shoved into him all at once, stretching him, Optimus's hips began rolling on their own. His calipers gave in easily, already relaxed and eager to accommodate something more substantial. So far he had experienced nothing but pleasure, and now that his frame had a taste of that, it demanded more – more of this exquisite attention to get lost in and forget about everything.

When the fingers retreated Optimus whined in relief; he was afraid he'd overload again, and it wasn't fair, he was falling apart and Megatron hadn't even retracted his interface panel yet! But then the warlord moved back to sitting position, Optimus raised optics at him – only to find out that Megatron had his panel open now, and his connector was already activated.

...Oh. Oh, wow. No, Optimus supposed there would be a significant size difference, and Megatron's equipment was proportional – smaller than what porn videos and fantasies suggested – but still. Quite unnerving in real life.

“It's... Um, I mean... Will it fit?” Optimus blabbered, blushing like mad. No, he knew that technically all ports were built in a “one-size-fits-all” manner, and Megatron spent quite an amount

of time stretching him, but theory and practice were two very different things.

Megatron simply grinned.

“Don’t fret, Optimus Prime, I had partners of your size before. It will be fine.” He tilted his head and made a beckoning gesture. “Don’t be ashamed, touch it.”

Optimus sat up too, licking his lips nervously. He wasn’t ashamed, not really; what he felt was a mixture of wariness and fascination. Slowly, uncertainly, his hand moved to stroke the length lightly. It twitched under his fingertips, and Megatron hissed through gritted dental plates, which gave Optimus courage. He could bring pleasure too; cause the same reaction Megatron wrung out of him. He gripped the connector properly, his port clenching at the notion that Optimus’s hand couldn’t wrap around its girth fully. Purple biolights at its base were glimmering fervently, betraying Megatron’s arousal, and small ridges and bumps covering the otherwise smooth surface promised the most delicious sensations.

Optimus was *so* going to take a ride on that.

He giggled at his own thoughts; alright, now he was ashamed.

“You, erm... Have a nice connector,” he mumbled and mentally slapped himself. Megatron’s soft laughter only made him blush more, but when he dared to look at the Decepticon, he didn’t see anything but good-natured humor.

“Come on, Optimus Prime,” Megatron grinned, “we’re not at the doctor’s. Say ‘spike’.”

“Go frag yourself, Megatron.” Optimus fought the desire to cover his face or at least to look away. Somehow the official technical terms made it all less intimate, easier to bear, than colloquial and informal “spike”. But the red-eyed bastard continued grinning, and Optimus fluffed his plating irately.

“Okay, okay! You have a nice spike. Happy?”

But suddenly Megatron’s face was very close to his, and before Optimus could do anything, the warlord breathed into his audial:

“Very.”

In the next instance he was being pushed down again until he was lying on the ground, legs spread and thrown over Megatron’s arms, and that huge spike was being pushed into him, inch by inch, making Optimus freeze with his mouth agape in a silent gasp. He felt every bump, every ridge as his port dilated, making way for the intrusion, until it was seated to the hilt, and Optimus had never though he could be so full..! There was actually a faint bulge on his stomach, where the segmented abdominal plates stuck out a bit, and it looked weird and a little creepy, but oh, it was so good!

And then Megatron started moving.

Optimus cried out, every node in his port suddenly coming to life. Keen, electrifying bolts of pleasure pierced him, making his calipers squeeze, which in turn forced a strangled groan out of Megatron’s throat. The warlord’s broad palms clenched around slim silvery thighs, and he thrust again, and again, and again, until Optimus lost count.

They couldn’t kiss because of the difference in height, so Optimus was left to thrash around underneath Megatron, clawing at the dense ground. But this way nothing muffled his moans and wheezes, and every sound that escaped his moist and bitten lips seemed only to encourage the

warlord. Their fields overlapped, pulsing in synchrony, every sensor buzzed with charge; Optimus's port was smoldering hot, he couldn't possibly take this for long, yet every new thrust proved that he could. Megatron basically held his lower torso in the air, giving him no real leverage, but Optimus still tried to buck his hips, greedily taking everything that was given to him. He felt wanton and depraved and so wonderfully, gloriously *alive*!

"Yes!" An arch of his back. "Megatron, please...!" A broken sob. "Frag... me!"

"Optimus..." That low, shuddering growl went straight to his spark, filled his fuel lines like the strongest high grade – and Optimus overloaded. His field exploded with charge, his port convulsed in rhythmic waves, and that, probably, was what pushed Megatron over the edge; Optimus's processor didn't even register the coolant flooding his port – nor did it register a distinctive click that followed.

The first thing Optimus came to, however, was the sense of incredible *fullness*. The Prime blinked sleepily, marveling at how *sated* he felt. He was also exhausted, almost indecently happy, and had absolutely no desire to move. He sighed, stretching his servos, and froze at the strange sensation of fluid sloshing inside his port. Only then did he fully grasp the fact that he was still impaled on Megatron's spike.

The warlord was hunched over him, grey plating loosened to help his systems cool down. When he caught Optimus's gaze, he smiled and tried to pull out... But couldn't.

His connector remained buried in Optimus's body, and their biolights were blinking in perfect unison. Which could mean only one thing.

They were locked.

Optimus gawked at their joined equipment with a flabbergasted, slack-jawed expression. No, he was aware that it was an ancient, perfectly natural process: small latches at the spike's base and the port's rim activated after an overload in order to keep inside the coolant the connector released, so that it could protect both systems from overheating. But it was rather rare in modern times, since it required simultaneous overloads and no oral or kinky stuff. Many Autobot couples considered it romantic, because it gave them another chance to cuddle, whispering sweet nothings to each other. But nobody did it during one night stands!

By the Allspark, that was awkward.

Optimus cast a sidelong glance at Megatron, almost afraid of what he would say, but the warlord looked puzzled rather than annoyed.

"Interesting. It's been a long time since I last experienced this kind of thing." He hummed, tracing Optimus's bulging abdominal plating, and chuckled at the flash of embarrassment in the Prime's field. But Megatron's own EM field resumed that content, steady pulse, now that his lust had subsided, and it soothed Optimus's doubts. Some tiny, acrid part of his mind insisted that he should think about the gravity of what he'd just done, but the rest of Optimus wanted nothing but to doze off.

He really had no energy to deal with the problems right now.

Megatron straightened his back and fidgeted, finding a more or less comfortable pose that won't do further damage to his maimed legs. Optimus's aft was still lying neatly in his lap, with the Prime's thighs spread obscenely. They just had to wait until the locks released, and then they could recharge.

Optimus shut his optics, promising himself to open them in a minute. His battle protocols usually helped him to stay alert when needed, so he wasn't worried about falling into recharge. He'd just rest for a klik...

In his drowsy state he missed the message about the updates his battle protocols made upon analyzing the recent events, and how the status of Megatron's energy signature switched from "enemy" to "neutral" due to "consensual act of interfacing".

It the next moment Optimus was sound asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I dedicate this chapter to my friend who reads the kinkiest hardcore porn but can't say the word "cock" out loud. You know who you are, sweetie~

Part II, Chapter 7

Megatron licked the energon off his fingers and lay down with a pleased sigh, lounging on the floor near the stream. Its jolly splatter soothed him, and the young Decepticon closed his optics, relishing the moment of calm and content.

It has been four deca-cycles since the unfortunate incident with the guard. Megatron still failed to feel the slightest remorse for killing him, and he doubted the other miners mourned the guy; shouldn't have used shocking stick first if he didn't want to get slagged. What Megatron did regret was running deep into the mine in attempt to get the other guards off his tail. He thought they wouldn't follow him into the unstable sector and would definitely refrain from using firearms there, but apparently, things that were obvious to a warbuild (even one who had never held a weapon) weren't obvious to the Autobots. Their shooting caused a cave-in, the floor under Megatron's feet collapsed, and after a long, painful fall he found himself in the depths of the Underworld, so far from the surface that no signal could reach through.

At first he was scared out of his wits. The ground sickness – an eternal companion of all warbuild miners – intensified, and Megatron spent the first two days crouching, trying to fight off dizziness, and purging his fuel tanks until there was nothing left to vomit.

After a while it became better, though. His organism grew accustomed to the new conditions, and Megatron learned to stop himself from calculating just how many hics of solid metal and rock separated him from the open sky. The moment he could walk without having to lean on the walls every now and then he began exploring the strange maze of tunnels that crossed the Underworld; his natural sense of direction, suited for orienting in the air, was useless here, but Megatron hoped that he would eventually find a way to the surface.

To his surprise, the Underworld wasn't dark. There were thin lines of blinking blue lights adorning the tunnels, reminding Megatron of biolights all Cybertronians possessed. Sometimes he saw energon crystals, and those he carved out and collected. He had no tools to build even the most basic of refining machines, so he had to spend tedious hours crushing the crystals into powder, careful not to detonate them by accident, and then gulped down that powder, mixing it with oral lubricant. It wasn't a healthy diet, but at least it kept him online. That was until he stumbled upon a herd of giant mechaslugs feeding on the crystals. This was quite a shock: mechaslugs were believed to be extinct for eons; they were the original living "refinery factories" that once taught ancient Cybertronians how to make liquid energon. But, apparently, they still thrived in the depths of the Underworld. Megatron found a smaller one that ventured far from the herd; mechaslugs were mostly harmless, but their sheer size made them formidable enemies, especially when the hunter had nothing but his own bare hands and fangs to fight with. Nevertheless, Megatron's plan worked: other slugs preferred to stay close to each other instead of helping their unfortunate comrade, and finally Megatron had a normal, proper meal. He put the leftover fuel tanks into his subspace for future use, but it proved to be an unnecessary measure: the longer he travelled, the more often he saw mechaslug herds.

In a few sunless days the passage led Megatron into a monumental hall. The road ended in a small terrace, the ceiling and the other wall were barely discernible in the distance. There seemed to be holes in there, presumably leading to other passages, but they were too high, and Megatron had no means of reaching them. Unless...

He cast a glance at his legs, or rather at the flight locks attached to his calves. They were supposed to shock anyone who tried to disable them, but Megatron knew how to bypass those... in

theory. It was a knowledge passed on from older miners to the younger, but nobody had a chance to actually try it under the vigilant scrutiny of the guards. Those who tried ended up in detention facilities.

But there were no guards here. Megatron's spark leapt in his chest; he could take off the flight locks! He could...

He could try flying!

Endless hours of reciting the instructions in his mind like a sacred prayer while he dug into the hard rock with his pickaxe paid off at last. The flight locks opened, and Megatron was left to stand with the offline devices in his hands, exhilarated and terrified at the same time. His turbines started working on their own, urging him to try it, to jump into the air and reclaim the ability that was stolen from him before he was born.

It took some clumsy attempts and several crashes until Megatron figured out how to control his movements, but afterwards he began learning rapidly. His frame was remembering and catching up with what was natural for it. Then Megatron recalled that he also had an altmode (he scanned it during one of his surface days, determined to choose the best one even though he might never get to use it). Flying in the altmode turned out to be even easier, and soon Megatron was maneuvering through the winding arcades of halls and chasms, performing stunts he had just made up and laughing openly. Even his quest to find the exit was forgotten; for a while he simply took pleasure in exploring the strange and mysterious Underworld where, he was sure, no mech had ventured before, and flying to his spark's content.

His latest great discovery was a stream of purest liquid energon; it seemed to flow inside the wall and came to the surface only to fall in a thin dribble into a pool between strange mechanic formations of unknown purpose. Megatron was cautious about it at first – who knew what else lived in the Underworld beside mechaslugs? – but nobody and nothing came to feed on the energon, so he shrugged and declared the stream his property.

Now that he had a constant source of refined energon he stopped travelling, deciding that he could rest here for some time, maybe learn more about the vicinity and come up with better way of finding the right direction to the surface rather than wandering aimlessly.

Megatron opened his optics, staring at the familiar patterns the blue lights created on the ceiling far above him. The Underworld was one big enigma, and it offered infinite challenges for Megatron's endless curiosity. He had more energon than he could drink, enough space to fly and – most importantly – nobody to give him orders and make him do the work no self-respecting warrior should ever do. For the first time in his short dull life Megatron actually felt... happy?

It was a strange thing to grasp. Happiness had always been an ephemeral concept, created by Autobots who loved to use it as they sat in their soft chairs or addressed the crowd from the tribune. They spoke of finding happiness in productive labor for the good of the society, of being a cog in the great Cybertronian machine. But Megatron failed to see how his job should bring him joy, and from his talks with other miners he figured that they were far from happy too.

As the days passed, Megatron started wondering if he should go back at all.

The idea seemed unnatural at first, but the more Megatron contemplated it, the more appealing it became. Seriously, what good could possibly wait for him on the surface? Only new flight locks and prosecution for murdering the guard. He'd be sent to prison or put into some new "rehabilitation program" to dig in the dirt for the rest of his life. In best case scenario he'd be sent to the fighting pits, where most of the warbuild murderers went – to "make use of their savage

instincts”, as the Autobot officials stated. Yes, it was better than other options – at least he’d get to fly and fight – but there was no honor and no dignity in fighting for the Autobots’ entertainment. They defiled even gladiatorial combat, the most ancient of Decepticon traditions, and turned it into a degrading business.

Here, however, Megatron was free. The ground sickness he could live with, and although it was a pity he’d never see the sky again, the longing was eased by the simple act of flying. He’d have to spend his days alone, but then Megatron had never been the most social mech. Here nobody would ever order him around again.

Yes. Maybe it was the hand of fate that caused that cave-in. Maybe he, of all Decepticons, was chosen to be delivered from his shackles. The Autobots said there was no use for the warbuilds in the era of peace and prosperity they created, so fate brought Megatron to the primeval part of Cybertron that never knew Autobots and their peace.

He sat up, the fresh-made decision filling him with energy. He could do anything he wanted whenever he wanted, right? Grinning, Megatron activated his thrusters, transformed and flew up to the domed ceiling – only to dive down, to a hole in the floor that he hadn’t explored yet.

This passage had many narrow spaces and unexpected turns, but Megatron enjoyed challenging his newfound flying skills. He learned to distinguish different types of tunnels, and this one belonged to the variety that connected larger hollows. He wasn’t mistaken: another couple of twists, and the tunnel opened into a cavern which dwarfed all that Megatron had seen so far. Transforming into his route mode, Megatron hovered in mid-air and looked around, EM field bubbling with enthusiasm. This cave was so vast that the farthest wall disappeared in the eternal dusk of the Underworld. And the ceiling was strange: right above his head Megatron saw something he took for another tunnel at first – an enormous black void, shaped in a perfect circle. There was no light inside, which was a bit unsettling; suddenly Megatron felt uncomfortably tiny. Still, he refused to be intimidated. His thrusters’ roar toned down, bringing him down to the floor, so that he could get a better view. When Megatron’s feet touched the ground, he tore his gaze from the black circle overhead... and froze.

Far, far to the right the outlines of another tremendous circle emerged from the semi-darkness. The more Megatron studied them, the stronger some indecipherable nagging in the back of his mind grew. And then it dawned upon him like a strike of a hammer.

He was looking at colossal flight engines.

The same thrusters that drove spaceships across the stars, the same thrusters Megatron bore on his legs, only much, much bigger – he was looking at Cybertron’s flight engines!

He spent next deca-cycle roaming through the nearby halls and corridors. What he found there shattered the foundations of his world – and then forged the pieces into steel resolve. Megatron changed his mind: he **would** go back to the surface. He had to come back.

Fate brought him here, and now Megatron knew why. There was a way to get rid of the Autobots’ suffocating peace once and for all; the secret Megatron learned here was the key to his people’s future.

And he was destined to lead them into this future.

Megatron woke up and stared at the rocky roof, unable to grasp why it was so low and lacked

familiar biolight lines. But as his processor booted, he recalled where and when he was. Right; a cave on Quintessa. This was just a dream of an old memory.

Most of his dreams were memories; Megatron wasn't quite sure why he was unable to dream of vivid fantasies like other bots. But this one he hadn't seen for a while. Whatever brought that up...

He propped himself on his elbows, examining the little chamber. The generator continued to work, illuminating it with orange glow. Lugnut was nowhere to be seen, but Optimus Prime was recharging peacefully on the floor, curled up on his side with his face to Megatron.

The corners of the warlord's mouth rose slightly, and he fought the desire to stroke the Prime's antenna. The Autobot fell asleep while they were still connected together, but Megatron decided not to wake him. He simply waited until their equipment unlocked at last, then cleaned them both and pushed the Prime to the side. He briefly considered rolling Optimus to the corner, but that would've definitely woken him up, so Megatron settled on making sure they didn't touch in recharge. No matter how warm the Autobot was and how lively his EM field rippled, Megatron could never truly rest when he sensed somebody else's presence so close.

But Optimus, apparently, could, and had no problems with sleeping while having his enemy's spike inside him. On the other hand, he must've simply been too exhausted; perhaps Megatron should consider this an achievement.

It sent nice tingly waves down Megatron's spine, and the warlord shook his head. If he could give himself a disappointed scowl, he would. He started this little game of seduction to sway the Prime's loyalties, but got truly invested into it as the time passed by. It was unfair; the Autobots didn't deserve the loyalty of this little mech, not with how they treated him. If Optimus was a Decepticon, he would have long made a spectacular career, like his friend Blackarachnia once. Yet he had those weird ideas ingrained in his processor – that he was guilty of losing Elita-1, that he owed Sentinel something.

To Megatron it was hard to fathom how such a brilliant, talented, smart person could not notice his own qualities and use them to his advantage. It invoked the warlord's possessive instincts: the Autobots didn't want this mech? Fine, then Megatron will claim him first!

And he indeed claimed the Prime, in a way. Megatron smirked, checking out the Autobot's sleeping form. He wondered if Optimus's superiors knew he had a thing for big bad Decepticons. Poor Optimus seemed quite ashamed of this fact, but Megatron made sure the Prime didn't regret it. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely last night.

To be honest, Megatron enjoyed himself too, much more than he supposed in the beginning of their illicit prison affair. He had never found Autobots very attractive (he usually preferred larger and stronger frames), but the little Prime had the cutest most expressive face, and those plump lips just begged to be kissed and bitten. And his demeanor... Megatron was used to be surrounded by people who knew where they stood; weak or unsure Decepticons didn't get to live for long. But Optimus was different: Megatron would never call him weak, yet the way he reacted to Megatron's praise and touch, the whirlwind of conflicting emotions in his field that he failed to conceal – all of it screamed of loneliness and starvation for attention. It made him vulnerable. Megatron hated vulnerability; in any other case he'd take advantage of it and strike where it hurts the moment he got the chance. But he didn't want to do that to Optimus; the Prime managed to intrigue him, and now Megatron wanted to try a new tactic. Optimus was so receptive, so easily moved by caress and kind word... Although his loyalty and sense of duty were adamant. It would be a tricky puzzle, but Megatron had a reputation of being the master of persuasion. Quints had a point when they wanted to remove Optimus and not Sentinel from the Autobot cause, and Megatron was dead set on doing

what they failed to do.

Once more confident in his chosen course of action, Megatron nodded to himself and sat up. His chronometer informed him it was morning already, but he slept through the night undisturbed. Frowning, Megatron opened the comm line.

[Lugnut.]

[Yes, my liege!] Lugnut sounded ever ready, like always. So he didn't fall in recharge out there.

[Why didn't you wake me? I didn't order you to stand on guard all night.]

[Forgive me, oh glorious leader!] Now he had that repenting sinner's intonation. By the Allspark... [I didn't want to disturb your rest. Don't doubt me, please, oh great one! I had plenty of energon and I'm not tired, I won't be a liability to your grand plans, master!]

Megatron opened his mouth, intending to reprimand the big oaf for the audacity, but then his gaze fell on Optimus's sleeping face. It *would* have been awkward if Lugnut barged in when they were still locked, and, now that Megatron thought of it, he did feel better than usual. Maybe there was sense in Lugnut's decision.

[I will trust your estimation. Do not fail me, my most loyal servant,] he said ceremoniously, knowing how to reward Lugnut the best. The warrior spluttered a fountain of thanks and praises, but Megatron didn't listen to those.

[Come in, we're moving out in a couple of klicks.] He turned to Optimus and hailed his comm frequency. [Wake up, little Prime.]

Optimus jumped right where he lay, blue optics snapping open, wide and disoriented. But in the next moment he assessed his surroundings, winced a little as he rubbed his behind, and then Megatron had the delight of watching the realization set in. Optimus stared at him, mouth agape, something akin to base terror written on his face – and Lugnut chose this very moment to tumble into the cave, his booming voice immediately filling it:

“Good morning, my liege! I hope your night was satisfying!” His central optic fixed on Optimus and zoomed in. “You should be proud, Autobot! It's an honor to interface with great Lord Megatron, whose skills in berth are magnificent and unrivalled.”

“Shut up, Lugnut,” Megatron said absent-mindedly, too fascinated by observing the Prime to be really angry. Optimus didn't appear proud – if anything, he was mortified; he hid his face in his palms, shoulders trembling slightly. But, judging by the peaks of his EM field, Lugnut distracted him from the fact that he swapped paint with an enemy; what tormented Optimus now was simple embarrassment.

Megatron might work on that in the future as well.

Optimus was so engrossed in his suffering that he didn't even see where they were going; thankfully, Megatron didn't try to speak with him, because Optimus doubted he'd be able to look at the warlord, much less talk. To make matters worse, his frame felt deliciously sated and refreshed, not caring the least for the woes of the processor. His port was pleasantly sore, and every step resonated in it, reminding Optimus of what he'd done.

He let his enemy frag him. Pits, he practically *begged* his enemy to frag him, and he loved every

second of it. Not just any enemy – Megatron himself! Optimus was a disgrace to the Autobots, to the Elite Guard (which he wasn't part of, but still) and to his friends. What has gotten into him yesterday?!

A sarcastic voice in his mind suggested that it was Megatron's spike that got into him, and Optimus suppressed a growl. Like he needed any more crimes added to his list, particularly treason...

Yet some side of Optimus refused to take part in this self-flagellation. Yes, he committed an act of treason, but he remembered how good it felt. How good *Optimus* felt for a while, how all his troubles and uncertainties dispersed, chased away by pleasure – pleasure he shared with another. And, if to forget for a moment *whom* he spent the night with, Optimus had to admit: this was the best first time he could dream of, the exact kind he fantasized about as he melted under his phantom programmed bot's fake touch.

...Maybe Optimus sentenced himself to this when he gave that programmed bot Megatron's voice.

The Prime shook his head. No-no-no; their adventure on Quintessa was coming to an end, and last night was simply a part of this adventure. Megatron's got what he wanted, Optimus's got what he wanted, now there was no reason for that frustrating game of teasing they were playing, and when they leave this planet, everything'll go back to the way it was before. They will be enemies again, just how they're supposed to be.

He brutally squashed the twinge of regret at this thought.

Fortunately, they read the map correctly: they approached another lost city before midday, and uncovered a group of ruins near a fallen and half-rusted statue of a Quintesson ship. But the initial elation died out when hours passed, and they still found no spaceship. What once was an airfield now was covered with jungle, trees growing wildly on a flat, building-free ground. Optimus and his companions searched for hours, leaving no part of the former field unchecked, but didn't see even a broken carcass of a ship.

That is, until their way was crossed by a ravine.

“We've never seen those before,” Megatron commented, narrowing his optics. “If it's the remnant of an earthquake, why here, at the very place we sought?”

Optimus went down on one knee before the chasm and activated his remaining headlight.

“Strange... It seems like there is no opposite wall in front of us. Like it just disappears somewhere below.” He touched the edge of the ravine. “And the crack is too smooth, almost as if it was... artificial.”

“I can fly inside to see what's there, my liege!” Lugnut boasted, and this time Megatron didn't object.

“You do that. Put me down.”

Lugnut instantly obeyed, placing Megatron on the ground with utmost care, and stepped closer to the ravine.

“If anything goes wrong, get out of there; do not engage in any fights.” Megatron took out the energy generator, activated it and gave to the giant. “I trust in your capabilities, my faithful Lugnut.”

The warrior nearly jumped out of his armor.

“Yes, my lord! Thank you, my lord!” Then his mighty engines roared, and he dove into the chasm.

Several kliks dragged by, impossibly drawled out by waiting, and finally Lugnut's voice howled something from below; unfortunately, all sounds were distorted by echo.

Megatron winced.

[Use the commlink, Lugnut,] he said, opening a common frequency for all three of them, and now Lugnut's voice bellowed in Optimus's audials too:

[I found it, my liege! It is here!]

[*What* is here?] Megatron was losing patience.

[The ship! I found a spaceship!]

Optimus had a better chance to figure out how Quintesson spaceport worked as he clung to Lugnut, the warrior slowly descending into the darkness and the crescent of light becoming smaller over their heads, until it was barely visible. The ravine proved to be more of a deep well, covered by a flat cap; it was stuck while opening and, apparently, spent thousands of years like that, until trees conquered it like another patch of free ground.

Lugnut landed with a low thud, and Optimus immediately slid off his back. In the faint orange glow of the generator he saw a mass of curved metal that did resemble the shuttle which brought Optimus to Quintessa.

“There must be central lighting here,” Megatron said from his high seat in Lugnut's arms. “This place was well-protected from the weather, so the systems could be intact.”

Another half an hour of searching they found a switch, and white electric light filled the well. Now Optimus was able to properly see the ship that was supposed to bring them to the orbit – and the sight made him freeze in his tracks.

“What a piece of scrap!” The ship looked so old it could fall apart at mere touch, and it was attached to a freakin' *launch pad*! It was built so long ago that it needed a launch pad to set off!

But, to his surprise, Megatron didn't seem discouraged at all.

“It's no Doomsday-class warship alright, but we don't need to battle the entire Quintesson fleet on it. Its purpose is to bring us to the orbit, and for this it should be enough. Besides, it's not the worst ship I've used. Remember that flying junkyard we commandeered from the arena's hangar, eh, Lugnut?” Megatron grinned at his servant, his mood obviously uplifted.

“Yes, oh great one! You piloted it gloriously!”

“Anyway, we should check if it can fly at all and what needs repairing.” Megatron glanced over the shuttle. “The light will have to be switched off in the evening, so I suggest you two search the facility and see what can be salvaged. Meanwhile I'll check the cockpit and see what we have to work with.”

Optimus didn't see any reason to argue, so he followed Lugnut up the gangway to the open hatch as

the warrior brought Megatron to the command chair, and then followed him out into the passages around the underground hangar bay.

Their trip proved to be rather fruitful. They found a storage of fuel (Lugnut tasted it and declared it suitable), a repair shop, a resting room for service teams (fortunately, abandoned) – and no monsters or new perils. Everything was in more or less tolerable condition thanks to being underground. The Quintessons built their spaceports well.

Upon hearing about the repair shop Megatron demanded that Lugnut brought him there and left him alone.

“I will join you later,” he said, and Optimus had to accept this explanation (or rather, the lack thereof). He concentrated on patching up the ship's hull with pieces of metal Lugnut brought to him. The huge warrior didn't say much, but the brush of his EM field against Optimus's own was much friendlier than before; Optimus tried not to think about the reason for that.

They worked in relative harmony for several hours, and then they heard something neither of them was prepared to hear: footsteps.

Optimus and Lugnut both spun around, aiming their weapons at the passage (although Optimus's soldering iron was not as impressive as Lugnut's cannons), but were answered with a low chuckle:

“At ease, soldiers.” Megatron stopped in the doorway, arms akimbo. “My commendations for the vigilance.”

Lugnut lowered his weapons instantly and fell on his knees with a loud clang, spilling out apologies and praises, but Optimus could only stare. Megatron didn't waste time in the repair shop: he had thick plates of metal welded to his knees from four sides, forming boxy semblances of real prosthetics. They were crude and clearly didn't give much freedom of movement, but at least they allowed Megatron to walk on his own.

“Congratulations,” Optimus blurted out.

“I can't appear before my Decepticons when I'm being carried around.” Megatron walked to them with feigned nonchalance and nodded at Lugnut, giving him a sign to stand up. “I'll go see what's wrong with the engines.”

He had already disappeared in the bowels of the ship when Optimus understood what bugged him about this situation: *his battle protocols didn't warn him of Megatron's presence.*

His battle protocols didn't classify Megatron as a foe!

Optimus opened all recent update logs, skimmed through them – and moaned, pressing his forehead to the cold side of the ship. Sweet Allspark, this was too shameful. Unacceptable!

“Are you alright, Autobot?” Lugnut was looming over him, central optic cycling down at him.

“Fine,” Optimus rasped. “Why would you care?”

“Glorious Lord Megatron showed interest in you.” Lugnut's auxiliary optics blinked. “You should be honored.”

“Yeah, you already said that.” Optimus coughed, not looking forward to hearing another ode to Megatron's interfacing prowess (and he really didn't want to know if Lugnut based his odes on assumptions or personal experience). “Let's switch off the light, it's almost twilight on the surface.

I'll use my headlamp.”

To his shock, Lugnut mumbled some indistinct agreement and went to the light controls. Optimus stared at his back, fighting an urge to wipe his optics. Well, now; apparently, sharing berth with Megatron did give Optimus some bonus points in the giant Decepticon's eyes.

They worked on the ship without recharge, taking breaks only to refuel. Optimus was unsure at first that they'd be able to quickly master Quintesson tech, but Megatron and Lugnut turned out to have some knowledge about it.

“We didn't have our own ships at the beginning of the Great War,” Megatron told him as he replaced one of the engine's components with Optimus's help, “so we used the ships we took from the Autobots and bought some from third parties. Quintessons are always there to sell you old junk they don't need at the highest price. We got rid of those as soon as we established our own shipyard, but I still remember repairing them. This shuttle is even older, though,” Megatron patted the engine.

It was unusual to imagine the (glorious, Optimus thought automatically, and snorted) lord of the Decepticons tinkering with greasy old spaceships like some lowly maintenance bot. From what Optimus observed Megatron refrained from dirty work unless absolutely necessary. But he did demonstrate remarkable skills, with all those devices he managed to construct in professor Sumdac's lab with only pincers for hands...

The more Optimus heard about the early days of the Great War and the times before it, the more interested he grew. He was afraid of asking too many questions – who knew how the 'cons would react? - but he wanted to learn. His love of history aside, if he had a better picture of the Decepticons' perspective, he'd get a chance of negotiating with them. Megatron said the Autobot peace meant death to them; then Optimus needed to find out which kind of peace didn't.

Finally, all of them agreed that they'd done everything they could: the ship was as ready for flight as it was physically possible; the armored cap protecting the launch silo was repaired and lubricated too. They chose midnight as the time for escape, since the dark side of the planet brought them the closest to the asteroid field right beyond Quintessa's orbit.

“One more time, Lugnut: do you have the approximate coordinates of the asteroid where you left the plasma dynamic thruster? Will you be able to find it again?” Megatron asked, sitting down on a metal box they screwed to the floor in front of the helm (since the Quintessons didn't use chairs).

“Of course, master! I would never lie to you, my liege!”

“Excellent.” Megatron nodded. “When you spot the asteroid, I open the cargo hatch, you fly there, grab the thruster and return. Then you set the coordinates for New Kaon and we leave this wretched place at last. Be quick, because hunter net or not, we'll still attract attention. Optimus, the turrets are yours. Keep the Quints busy.” He gripped the helm. “And I'll try to make sure we don't get vaporized.” With that said, he started the engine.

The shuttle groaned and began rattling, something twanging in its belly, and for a moment Optimus thought that the ship would fall apart right here and then – but the sounds continued, creating a miserable, yet steady noise. The launch pad began moving with a chilling screech, aiming the ship's nosecone upwards, and the silo's cap slid into its slot. Gulping, Optimus squeezed the

turret's controls, praying to the Allspark. The shuttle's engines roared as it set off, running up the launch shaft, tore through the forest's canopy and finally broke free, heading to Quintessa's pitch black night sky. Several clicks of absolute darkness – and the veil of clouds was left behind, stars greeting Optimus with their tranquil twinkling. Oh, how he missed them...

But he didn't have much time for sentiments. The hunter net was ahead – a web of satellite drones, small but deadly, surrounding the planet like another thin cloud. Optimus's fingers clenched the controls to the verge of pain; this little ship had no force field, they were absolutely defenseless, and the only weapons they had were ancient cannons that shot slagging *projectiles*! This ship was so old it didn't even have energy weapons!

But seconds ticked by, the hunter net drew closer, then moved past them... And Optimus was suddenly aware of his spark beating heavily and his fans whirring to cool down his overheating frame.

They have passed the hunter net. Their plan succeeded! The Quintesson shuttle passed the hunter net undetected!

More than anything Optimus wanted to fly away from this place on maximum speed, but Megatron slowed down instead: they were entering the asteroid field.

“Alright, Lugnut, your turn.” The warlord's voice was strained. “Where is that rock of yours?”

“There!” The warrior pointed his claw at a middle-sized asteroid in the distance. “There it is, my lord!” And he promptly ran off, for once not wasting time on grand speeches.

“Hurry,” Megatron hissed through clenched dental plates.

He had to concentrate his full attention on maneuvering the ungainly shuttle between the asteroids, so Optimus chose to watch the rear. And not a second too soon: the hunter net might have missed them, but the drones that searched the planet must've found the place of launch and revealed their scheme. The orbital drones were breaking the formation, heading in the fugitives' direction.

“Watch out, we're under attack!” Optimus warned, aiming his cannon at the closest enemy and firing.

Megatron sent their shuttle into a spin to avoid a laser volley. If only he still had his legs, so he could transform and meet the drones on equal ground... Pits, if only he could trust his half-destroyed thrusters! But as for now, he had to rely on the antique shuttle, an Autobot gunner and hope that Lugnut memorized the asteroid correctly.

Optimus proved to be quite a capable gunner, though. Even with an outdated weapon he managed to hit a couple of targets, and Megatron kept their ship out the line of fire so far, hiding behind asteroids and moving out to give Optimus a clear shot. However, they couldn't dance like this forever; they were outnumbered, outmatched, and pretty soon a stray shot would blow them to pieces...

That was when multiple missiles drove into the swarm of drones, exploding some and scattering the others, and Lugnut's energy signature appeared in the cargo bay.

[I got it! The plasma dynamic thruster!] He transmitted. [Ready to transwarp at your command, oh...]

[Now!] Megatron barked, and familiar blue sphere of transwarp energy surrounded the ship.

In the next instance they were gone.

No matter how many times Optimus experienced transwarp travel, he never ceased to be awed by the sheer abruptness of it. One moment he was pulling the trigger, firing at the Quintesson drones, and the next moment the attackers were left millions of light years away. The Prime ex-vented loudly, taking his numb fingers off the controls – but then his vocalizer hitched. He remembered where exactly he was.

Their shuttle was hanging at the orbit of a bare brown-grey planet. On the view screen Optimus could see a small moon right next to them; somebody had burned a huge Decepticon symbol on its surface with a laser. The next thing he noticed were two fighter jets heading straight to them, and then the shuttle's commlink came to life.

“Unidentified craft, you have entered the Decepticon space without authorization. Name yourself, or you'll be blasted into oblivion.” Judging by the Decepticon's enthusiastic tone, he was hoping for the latter. “I count to three. One...”

“Acid Storm, this is Lord Megatron,” Megatron used his best commanding voice – the one he reserved for official speeches. “Inform General Strika of my arrival.”

There was a splutter of staticky exclamations, but the jet (Acid Storm, apparently) got ahold of himself pretty fast.

“Yes, Lord Megatron! Right away!” He made a pause, and finally added: “Welcome to New Kaon, sir.”

The jets circled their shuttle, saluted them with short flashes of purple and flew off.

Megatron leaned back on his improvised stool, looking rather smug. His smirk only widened when Lugnut entered the cockpit, the plasma dynamic thruster nowhere to be seen. Optimus had a fair suspicion that it was hidden in the warrior's subspace; he also had a suspicion that these two exchanged some phrases on the private comm frequency.

Optimus squirmed in his seat. During their journey through Quintessa's jungle and repairs of the shuttle he got used to the Decepticons and began feeling more or less at ease among them. Here and now, in the very heart of the Decepticon Empire, Megatron and Lugnut were home, while Optimus...

Optimus was an enemy and a prisoner.

He also was at loss. Everything happened too fast, they left the Quintesson battle drones behind just a couple of kliks ago... And Optimus's (very vague) plan went to scrap before it could be set into motion. Now the dusty ball of New Kaon was growing larger as they descended, and soon Optimus was able to see the towers and buildings of a city. The streets were alive with movement, but the sky was just as busy, painted with contrails and the flares of thrusters.

The shuttle landed on a wide square at the outskirts of the city. The engines stopped, and the sudden quiet and stillness seemed almost deafening to Optimus. Panic overcame him, his throat constricted – but then a heavy palm lay on his shoulder.

“Let's go, Optimus.” It was strange to see Megatron standing upright. Like a mute puppet, Optimus rose to his numb feet and followed the warlord.

The hatch was open, with a gangway leading to the ground. Megatron went out first, watching his steps to make them seem smooth and confident, despite the crude prosthetics. Optimus wanted to stay behind, but Lugnut pushed him forward (albeit gently), and the Prime squinted, calibrating his optic sensors for the new lighting.

The square was filled with people, hundreds of red optics trained on Megatron and his companions. The crowd was strangely silent, only whispers floating over it like a breeze, and when Optimus looked down, he understood the reason. There was a group of warriors lined up before the gangway; Optimus recognized Shockwave and Blitzwing, others he hadn't seen before. And in front of them stood a huge, bulky Decepticon with magenta and gold armor. Optimus would take this person for a mech if he didn't recall her from photos and videos: Strika, Megatron's fearsome General of Destruction.

The massive femme went down on one knee.

“Welcome back, Lord Megatron,” she said, her voice deep and booming, but definitely feminine. The lined up soldiers and the welcoming crowd all copied her, kneeling.

“Rise, Strika, my ever-loyal General.” Megatron waited until the rest of the Decepticons followed her example and smiled at his subjects. “I have returned.”

The roar that followed shook the ground and the gangway under Optimus's feet. He moved closer to Lugnut's side, hiding in his and Megatron's shadow instinctively. This situation gave him a sense of déjà-vu: not so long ago it was him who was standing before an ecstatic crowd of Autobots, returning home with Megatron as his prisoner; now their positions were reversed. What a bizarre, cruel irony...

But to be fair, Optimus's entire life could be described as such.

Part III, Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This part's title is (obviously) a homage to MTMTE Annual. All credit goes to James Roberts.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part III. You, Me and Other Revelations

Chapter 1.

The first place Optimus visited on New Kaon was the hospital. Megatron disappeared in one of the wards, attended by a tiny mech with multiple spindly legs, who spoke a nigh undecipherable dialect; somehow he was the CMO around here. Optimus was left in the care of a tall black Decepticon named Flatline. The mask covering his face didn't hide his displeasure at having to treat an Autobot, but, to his credit, Flatline remained professional. Muttering curses under his breath, he cleaned Optimus's wounds, greased his joints, replaced broken panels and applied repair nanites where necessary. The only complaint Optimus had was that Flatline didn't disable his pain receptors, but the Prime had a suspicion it was a Decepticon thing.

"There," Flatline grumbled at last, wiping his hands. "Refrain from transforming for a deca-cycle, and if anything goes wrong, visit me. Now off you go," he was obviously glad to get rid of the Autobot, "your guide has already arrived."

"Guide?" Optimus echoed, unsure if he liked Flatline's intonation.

"He'll show you to your quarters." The medic's feigned sweetness only increased Optimus's suspicions. "I suggest you don't make him wait."

And when Optimus stepped into the hallway, he understood what Flatline meant, because he was greeted with the sight of Shockwave's featureless face. And, judging by one-eyed mech's unrestrained EM field, he was just as unhappy to see Optimus as Optimus was to see Ultra Magnus's killer.

"You," the Prime hissed, and only the fact that he was in the heart of the Decepticon capital, surrounded by enemies, stopped him from attacking the former Head of Autobot Intelligence right away.

"My sentiments exactly," Shockwave growled, his single red optic glowing. Optimus could bet he wanted to say something more, convey his displeasure properly, but the Decepticon managed to hold back. "Come with me," he uttered instead, pushing Optimus to walk in front of him.

Since the Prime was forbidden to transform, they both had to go on foot. It wasn't that long of a walk, though; their goal was a large imposing building resembling those Optimus saw in Kaon. He didn't have time to study it properly (Shockwave appeared to be in a hurry to finish with his mission).

Optimus was sure that he was going to be thrown into some dungeon, so he was rather flabbergasted when they stopped before a normal-looking door in the end of some inconspicuous passage. Shockwave input a code on the lock panel, the door slid aside – and Optimus found himself in a simple, but completely ordinary room. With a berth and all.

“But I thought...” The Prime was so puzzled that he forgot about his resolve to ignore Shockwave. “I thought by ‘quarters’ you meant a cell?”

Above him Shockwave grumbled.

“If it was my choice, Autobot, you’d be in a cell.” His voice turned genuinely incredulous. “But Lord Megatron wanted you to be treated with respect.” He obviously didn’t understand the reason for such an order, but didn’t even consider defying his master’s will. “Don’t think you can fool us, though. You have a tracking device installed into your frame, and in case you find it, I highly recommend you not to try removing it on your own. It can explode, you know.” If Shockwave had a mouth, Optimus was sure he’d be smirking. “Now rest, Autobot. Lord Megatron will send for you when he requires your service.”

With that said he shut the door and locked it from the outside, leaving Optimus alone.

With not much else to do, Optimus busied himself with inspecting his room. He didn’t find any booby traps (but setting them here would’ve been stupid; if the Cons wanted to kill him, they had much more effective means of doing it), although he did find a camera. The sole window was made of laserproof glass, and behind it there were a blind wall of some building, dull rock formations and dark navy blue sky above them. Optimus searched for a control panel to make the lights brighter, but found none; it appeared that thin glowing purple lines that Optimus took for emergency lighting were all that the apartment had to offer. What was it with Decepticons and their love for gloomy places?

All in all, the room was shockingly normal, if much bigger than what Optimus was used to. The berth alone could fit three Optimuses and then have some space left, but that was logical: the furniture was created with large warframes in mind. Apart from berth, there was a table with a console, an empty shelf, a couple of chairs and an energon dispenser. Another door led to a private washrack (to Optimus’s relief, with no camera). He used this chance to check himself over to try and locate the tracking device; slaggin’ Flatline must’ve installed it during the procedures! Optimus wasn’t successful, though, so he finally succumbed to his fate (for now) and decided to take a shower. He hadn’t washed since Cybertron!

For a while he could do nothing but sigh in bliss as the delightfully hot streams washed away the grime and dust of his long journey through Quintessa’s jungle, driving away the cold that appeared to have ingrained into his very circuits. Warm solvent helped clear his mind and arrange his erratic thoughts. Yes, his initial plan failed; but he lost a battle, not the war.

So, he was stuck on New Kaon – the very center of the Decepticon Empire (if a handful of star systems the exiles occupied even could be called an Empire; but Optimus supposed he shouldn’t say this in front of the ‘cons). His status was unclear: he was locked, but in a cozy apartment rather than a prison cell, and if Shockwave’s remarks were anything to go by, Optimus hadn’t fallen out of Megatron’s favor yet. He should try to keep it that way, study his surroundings and learn more about his hosts, then find a way to sabotage their research of the transwarp technology. Space bridges were the decisive factor of Autobot supremacy, and, regardless of Optimus’s own ideas of peace, his first and foremost duty as an Autobot was to defend his homeworld. Megatron was this close to conquering Cybertron with just one space bridge in his possession; what would he do if he

had the technology itself?

Realize the genocidal intentions he spoke of, without a doubt.

Nodding to himself, Optimus switched off the solvent and activated the compressed air dryer. It was vague, but it was a plan. However, first he needed to get out of this room without angering the Decepticons... which meant, unfortunately, that he had to wait.

Two Cybertronian solar cycles ticked by, but the sun behind the window rose and set only once; the day on New Kaon lasted longer than on Cybertron, Earth or Quintessa. By this time Optimus memorized every corner of his room that was slowly turning into prison.

He wasn't starving – the energon dispenser provided him with fuel in plenty. It had an unusual taste, and Optimus was cautious at first, but his analyzers found no toxic additives in it; besides, Optimus had his share of strange energy sources before (Earth fossil fuels and the octopus creatures' lifeblood being among the strangest). The energon turned out to be alright, if a bit hard to digest.

Optimus's true enemy during these two solar cycles was boredom. The console worked, but its hard drive was practically empty, and the Prime naturally didn't have authorization to access New Kaon's Grid. There was nothing to read, nothing to watch, nothing to study except for the boring landscape behind the laserproof glass. By day New Kaon's sky was bleak and brownish-red in color, only increasing the sense of restlessness. Optimus got so tired of this fruitless waiting that he forced himself to lie down and ended up recharging throughout the planet's long night.

The morning came with the long-awaited news. Optimus was sipping from the cube of energon, when the lock beeped, and the door slid open, revealing none other but Megatron.

"Good morning, Optimus Prime." Megatron gave him a familiar smile, like nothing between them changed; but the warlord himself had changed! He stood on his own two legs once more – real legs, not some DIY surrogates – and his entire frame was different. Square forms of Earth vehicle were gone, giving place to sharp angles and curves of pure Cybertronian – or rather, Decepticon-Cybertronian – design. Optimus knew it well from old chronicles and pictures, as did he know those elaborate helm outlines with spiky cheek guards.

Megatron was reveling in the effect.

"Well?" He asked, turning around slightly to let the glints play on his armor. "What do you think?"

"You're a conservative fellow, aren't you?" Optimus mumbled.

Megatron just laughed.

"Yes, you could say so. I find this form the most comfortable; it's good to get rid of that ugly Earth disguise." He gestured to Optimus's own frame. "Do you want to?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine," the Prime grunted, a little offended despite himself. He liked his Earth form; it reminded him of his friends and the little blue planet that became his second home.

"How are you doing? Were my soldiers treating you well?"

Optimus snorted.

“Treating me well? I haven’t even seen them for two solar cycles! Well, Flatline did treat my wounds, thanks for that, by the way, and the room is nice, but I’m starting to believe boredom is your torture method of choice.”

Megatron’s optic ridges rose.

“Is that so? Heh,” he chuckled, “it would seem my subordinates decided to express their feelings by obeying orders literally. I told Shockwave to show you to a room and make sure that you have energon and all necessary conveniences,” his face became serious. “Sorry about that. I’ll see to this problem.”

Optimus shifted, uncertain what to make of this. He expected a quite different reaction.

“Um, thank you,” he said at last. “And congratulations with getting your legs back,” he added belatedly. “It’s... good to see you healthy.”

“Really?” Megatron’s surprised smile seemed genuine, but not devoid of irony – and Optimus couldn’t help but join him. It *was* ridiculous, him approving of the Autobots’ worst enemy’s return to full health and power.

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “I don’t like to see mechs suffering, I guess. No matter who they are.” He looked at Megatron earnestly.

It was Megatron who averted his optics first.

“Speaking of dispelling the boredom.” The warlord clasped hands behind his back. “I came with a purpose, actually. While I was in the hospital I was briefed on the developments that happened in our absence. A strategy meeting is starting in five klicks; I want you to accompany me.”

Optimus’s jaw dropped.

“Accompany you? *To a strategy meeting?*” Was Megatron... insane? What kind of shrewd plan included inviting Autobots to a high-profile Decepticon strategy meeting?

The corners of Megatron’s mouth twitched, and the line of his lips tightened. It bothered Optimus; what kind of reaction was that? He didn’t like it.

Finally, Megatron spoke:

“There is something you need to know.”

No, Optimus didn’t like it *at all*.

Other Decepticons found Megatron’s idea just as crazy.

“Megatron? What in the Smelting Pits is *this*?” Strika put her hands on her hips, her giant figure appearing even bigger in anger. Polite “lord” was left out along with her patience.

“This is Optimus Prime,” Megatron’s hand on his shoulder felt like it weighted a ton as the Decepticon leader pushed Optimus forward. “The Autobot exile. He can offer his perspective regarding the circumstances.”

Optimus’s spark stung at the word “exile”, but for the moment he was more concerned with the glares of the Decepticons in the room. There weren’t many – beside Strika and Shockwave there

were two mechs whom Optimus hadn't met before: an old warrior with an eye-gouging neon paintjob that couldn't hide the traces of poor maintenance and aging, and a 'con of Optimus's own size who had an uncanny resemblance to Perceptor.

All in all, the assembly looked unfriendly. Optimus gritted his dental plates and tightened his armor.

"With all due respect, my lord," that was Strika again; apparently, she was the only one who dared to openly put Megatron's decisions into question, "but an Autobot, exile or not, has no place here."

"That would be my call to make," Megatron replied curtly, voice as even as ever – but there must've been some undertones Optimus didn't catch, because Strika grumbled something under her breath, bowed and stepped back.

"Now, if there are no further objections," Megatron glanced over the room, and his hand finally left Optimus's shoulder, "I would like to sum up what we're dealing with right now. Shockwave, if you please."

"Yes, my liege." Shockwave activated a holoprojector, and a virtual model of the galaxy appeared in the middle of the room. The Decepticons surrounded it, leaving a rather obvious empty space around Optimus; the Prime resolved not to irritate them further and stayed back in the shade of a corner.

His spark froze in his chest when colorful markings divided the map and Shockwave began explaining.

"As we can see, Cybertron is besieged. Quintesson forces appeared in the Autobot Commonwealth shortly after our escape; instead of blowing up the colonies, they headed straight for Cybertron itself. Sentinel Magnus managed to stop them from landing, and, considering the Quintessons' actions, it would stand to reason that they do not wish to destroy Cybertron. Why do they need the planet intact, we don't know, but they resorted to the tactic of attrition. They deployed the hunter nets, blocking all ship connection between the metropolis and the colonies. For now the only way for the Autobots to distribute goods and move troops is through the space bridge network, which resulted in the most important battles being fought for the space bridges. If the Autobots can't hold a bridge, they destroy it – a wise move, in my opinion. All of this forces Sentinel Magnus to stretch his troops and concentrate them around Cybertron and those space bridges they still possess. As a result," Shockwave zoomed in on the rim of the galaxy, "the outposts close to our borders are basically abandoned. Many colonies are unprotected as well, which leaves them vulnerable to an attack by any army that would want it, be it us or the Quintessons. Our sources report that the populace is fleeing, asking for refuge in nearby states or escaping to Cybertron. That's the general situation with the Autobots," he finished, crossing his arms. "For now it looks like a stalemate, but it is bound to change sooner or later."

"Thank you, Shockwave," Megatron nodded at his servant with approval. "Air Commander Scrash, your analysis of the situation?"

For a moment Optimus forgot about the horrors of what he'd just heard and stared at the neon-colored warrior. Scrash? This old, wretched mech was Scrash? The Decepticon Air Commander during the early stages of the Great War, succeeded by Starscream after losing three battles in a row? He looked... nothing like the arrogant, aloof mech Optimus saw in the documentaries.

"I would say that we have enough troops and ships to annex most of the colonies. Cybertron itself is out of reach for us due to the Quintesson fleet, and so is the space bridge network." Even Scrash's voice was unlike that cold conceited monotone Optimus remembered from the videos;

now the mech just sounded dull. “However, it might be a good chance to get back what we lost during the Great War and make the Autobots pay.”

“Strika?” Now Megatron glanced at the femme.

“I’d say it’s a load of slag.” Even without a proper face, Strika still managed to sneer. “We shouldn’t be running head-on into a conflict we don’t understand to grab some long-lost colonies like a sparkling trying to hold too many energon goodies. We’re not that mighty empire we once were; our fleet can’t protect so many scattered worlds. My suggestion is to let the Quints and the Autobots fight each other until one of the sides is destroyed. Then we attack the worn-out victor and secure Cybertron; as Shockwave said, there is no danger to the planet itself.”

Megatron hummed, rubbing his chin.

“This is a logical way... Too logical. I’m afraid the entire galaxy will be watching this war, and when the time for attack comes, we might have competition. Magnificus, any comments?”

All optics fixed on the black-and-red Perceptor lookalike, and Optimus wasn’t an exception. He frowned; he heard the name before. Wasn’t it the Decepticon diplomat? Why in the name of the Allspark did he get an Autobot frame? Perceptor’s, to be precise?

The strangest thing was to hear a normal, emotional voice coming out of Perceptor’s body. In fact, Magnificus had a very pleasant voice, rich, velvety and compelling.

“It is hard to predict how organics would react, my liege, because by the time this war ends entire generations could be born on the organic worlds. For now the Nebulon Republic is keeping neutrality, although I know for sure that their ambassador is still on Cybertron. The Vok usually stay in their own space; as far as we know, they’re not interested in expansion. However, I’m afraid that our robotic neighbors, the Vestials, will definitely want to add new non-organic planets to their territory. And let’s not forget about other, less prominent members of the Galactic Council; when a large empire is in agony, there will always be smaller states trying to tear a piece of it for themselves.”

There were more talking and more heated discussions, but Optimus didn’t really hear them. The information settled in his mind like a toxic fallout, poisoning him, pulling him out of reality. Everything was like in a haze before his glazed optics, and the Decepticons’ voices mixed into one distant buzz.

Cybertron was at war. His home was besieged by the Quintessons – frightening, unpredictable Quintessons who condemned the innocent and twisted their own planet. Optimus’s people were suffering, and nobody cared.

Autobots were fighting for their lives, and the rest of the Galaxy watched the tragedy like a flock of hungry vultures, thinking only of how they could profit from this tragedy. How they could use it to their advantage. How to tear apart the smoking ruins of Optimus’s home, home that was ravaged by war for millions of years and had just begun to embrace peace – only to be cast into a new war with ruthless invaders.

In the shadows of his corner Optimus sank to the floor and hid his face in his palms, as the Decepticons were arguing in which way to use the Autobots’ misery.

Megatron led silent and downcast Optimus back to his quarters and opened the door for him.

Optimus entered his comfortable prison without objection, too engrossed in his anguish, but when the lock clicked, he realized that Megatron stayed inside with him.

“What do you want?” Optimus rasped. A guess flashed in his mind – interface? – but Megatron remained where he stood and kept his hands to himself.

“You are upset.”

“Well, duh! I wonder why is that?!” A short laugh escaped his throat, and Optimus forced it back quickly; he didn’t need to get hysterical in Megatron’s presence. “Why?” he asked finally, clenching his fists. “Why did you take me to that meeting? To taunt me, to break my spirit?”

“Frankly speaking, I figured that you had the right to know what was going on,” Megatron said calmly. “And it’s better if you learn it directly from the source rather than overhear some rumors. But what is more, I wanted to hear your opinion too. You know your people better, especially those of your generation, and you are personally acquainted with the current Magnus. So what’s your assessment? How would the situation develop?”

Optimus frowned, drawing his EM field close to his body.

“And why do you think I would answer? You just want to use this war for your own gain. I’m not going to help you crush the Autobots.” He could pretend, though. Pretend he was angry at Sentinel and wanted revenge, earn the Decepticons’ trust and sabotage their operations... But no. Megatron would never believe him, and if he, by some miraculous means, did, then Strika wouldn’t. As today’s meeting showed, she had no qualms about questioning Megatron’s decisions.

“I understand that I’d have to take any advice from you with a certain amount of caution.” Megatron grinned, not disappointed in the slightest. “But you do care about Cybertron’s well-being, and you don’t want Quintessons to win. So in some regards our goals are similar. I have no doubts about the Autobots’ ability to defend their homeworld.” His optics narrowed. “But I wish to know if they will manage it with their current leader.”

Optimus’s EM field flared.

“Sentinel would rather die than let an alien force take over Cybertron,” he declared, but then a cold grip squeezed his spark.

Sentinel would also rather doom Cybertron and all its inhabitants than let an alien force take over. Like he was ready to fire at Omega Supreme at a risk of starting a reaction and destroying the planet.

Optimus didn’t say it out loud, though.

“And if he dies – then what? What will the Autobots do?”

“Choose a new leader... I suppose?” Optimus rubbed his temple. Imagining Sentinel’s death was scary – *not another of his friends, no!* – but Optimus truly couldn’t see any suitable candidates who could replace Sentinel. Rodimus, perhaps, but Rodimus was bed-ridden...

Or maybe...

No. Optimus shook his head, terrified by the mere possibility of thinking that. He was an exile. Most likely the reason for the Quintesson attack. He was a washout cadet and a head of a repair crew who fraternized with an enemy; he couldn’t lead a nation. He would never be allowed to.

“Then we’d better hope that Sentinel doesn’t die.”

Optimus glanced at Megatron again. The warlord’s face was strangely blank – something Optimus wasn’t used to, not in the latest deca-cycles.

“Tell me if you have any new ideas.” Megatron turned around, preparing to leave, but hesitated.

“Which reminds me. Here is the codes for your door and the map of the area,” he gave Optimus a small infochip. “You can go out and move around the city freely; well, relatively freely. Some areas like the spaceport or the science labs are restricted, of course. My troops will be informed about your status and forbidden to harm you, physically or verbally, unless you try something unacceptable. In that case they’re more than encouraged to stop you,” a dangerous smirk appeared on his lips briefly. “If somebody oversteps those boundaries, you have my comm line.” Megatron nodded to him in farewell. “I will send for you if I need you.”

In the next instance the door closed behind him.

Optimus just stared at it for a while, and then glanced down at the chip in his hand. Alright... That was unexpected.

But definitely an improvement.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is more of an exposition. Optimus has a lot to see on New Kaon...

Part III, Chapter 2

It was supposed to be his triumphant mission. His heroic deed. An act that will inspire numerous cadets and breathe new life into the faltering spirits of the Autobot army. They would see how bravely their Magnus fought for their common cause at the very frontline, where battles were the most brutal. Nobody would ever call him a coward for commanding from the stronghold of Fortress Maximus, and nobody would say that he groveled before Quintessons and sold Cybertron's young hero Optimus Prime to them. He would prove that he was a hero much better than Optimus, a rightful Magnus and an heir worthy of Ultra Magnus's legacy.

At least this was what Sentinel had in mind when he travelled to the space bridge nexus of Velocitron with a hand-picked squad of Elite Guard soldiers.

Velocitron had become a true trouble spot in the few deca-cycles of this unexpected war. It was an old, wealthy colony, rich with resources and heavily populated. It supplied Cybertron with fuel, raw materials, ammunition and plenty of recruits, which became especially important now that Cybertron was under blockade. Losing Velocitron was unimaginable, and when its garrison's latest report came in the form of all but desperate plea for back-up, Sentinel decided to jump the chance.

He was going to defend his people like he always intended; he was going to push the Quints back, to turn the tide of the war, perhaps... He was going to become the hero Cybertron really needed.

He had never thought it would come to this.

His Skyboom Shield buzzed as another round of laser fire rained on it. Sentinel gritted his dental plates, rearranging the energy consuming rates of his frame yet again. This time it was medical protocol that went offline, but the small wounds in his thigh Sentinel could bear. He couldn't fail, he couldn't fall from exhaustion right in front of his subjects.

"Sentinel Magnus, sir!" The commander of the squad defending the nexus – Sentinel didn't remember his name – had to shout in order to get through the howls of lasers. "Our sensors detected another Quintesson warship en route! They're intensifying the attack – I think they know you're here, sir!"

"And?!" Sentinel barked, declining the shield system's suggestion to decrease the range. He had to protect not only his troops, but also the space bridge controls.

"We can't fight them for too long! We must fall back while we still can!"

"No!" Sentinel turned his head to the soldier, optics white in rage. "Hold the line! That's an order!"

"Sir, we're being slaughtered..."

"Sacrifices will only harden our resolve. We must not lose Velocitron!"

"But sir, Velocitron is already lost."

The mech's face was sad – he had already resigned – he had already accepted defeat! Sentinel seethed, but somewhere deep under his helpless wrath, in the very core of his spark, icy dread was uncoiling. The squad commander was looking at him with pity – how dared he..?! Sentinel wasn't... Sentinel couldn't...

Sentinel couldn't return to Cybertron in shame.

His gaze strayed away from the soldier, wandering over the jagged ruins of the battlefield, to the Quintesson Bailiffs and cannon fodder, then to the holographic map of the system... The Quintessons landed on Velocitron. He... Those fools, those cowards that didn't deserve to call themselves Autobots, they allowed it to happen!

They had to retreat.

"Fine," Sentinel grinded out. "Give an order to withdraw. Let all soldiers get to the space bridge and transwarp to Cybertron. My squad will cover you and detonate the nexus."

"Yes, sir!"

The commander transformed and drove away, already sending orders on all frequencies. Sentinel grunted and began stepping back slowly; maybe he would get his great deed after all.

But the universe had to screw with him once again. Just as the last of his team was prepared to leave, Sentinel deactivated his shield to personally set up the timer. The Quintessons didn't lose a second: Sentinel only heard somebody screaming "Grenade!", there was a flash of light, and an EMP wave coursed through Sentinel's body.

He fell on the ground, grasping at his fleeing consciousness with all his might; his vision was dull, his audials were filled with deafening ringing, but right in front of him there lay the timer – so close, but just out of reach! He couldn't move a finger, and he saw the thick feet of the Bailiffs approaching – no, no, they mustn't take the space bridge, not a fully operational space bridge! It will give them access to Cybertron, and Sentinel would be the one who gave it to them... The one who lost Velocitron *and* Cybertron.

If Sentinel wasn't paralyzed, he'd cry. Terror and humiliation writhed inside him, woven into a ball of barbed wire, tearing him apart...

And then, right before he lost consciousness, he heard laser fire and familiar thickly accented voices yell:

"Hands off our sir!"

He wanted to say something, wanted to call out to these hallucinations, but his processor was shutting down. The last thing he registered was somebody lifting his limp body and a ground-shattering explosion.

Then there was darkness.

"Wake up, sir!"

"Are safe!"

Sentinel's CPU was slowly rebooting, and when he opened his optics, he saw nothing but huge blurry spots of orange and blue. Their movements were making him nauseous, and Sentinel blinked, resetting the visual sensors.

Colorful blurs reassembled into the faces of Jetfire and Jetstorm. Both were grinning like crazy.

"Sir!"

“You okay!”

“We were so worried!”

The twins pounced at him, heaping up on his chest like a wiggly lump of metal and crushing him with hugs. Sentinel groaned, not out of his post-EMP haze, and made a weak attempt to push the overzealous twins away.

Wait. Where in the world did the twins come from?

He sat up hastily, finally disentangling himself from the joyous bot-pile.

“What... What are you doing here?” he rasped, his vocalizer not quite obeying him. “And where is ‘here’?” It was some planetoid, judging by the bare grey surface and the thin atmosphere.

“That’s Velocitron’s moon,” Jetfire elaborated gleefully. “We brought you here.”

“The Quints were gonna end you.”

“We blew up space bridge too.”

“Then grabbed you and flew away.”

“We heard messages at Sumdac tower. Bumblebee was listening, they said you in trouble, so we stormed their space bridge and came to you.”

“Sumdac... tower?” Sentinel shook his head, trying to bring his thoughts in order, but that name flashed in his mind, making everything clear. “Earth! You were on Earth all this time! That traitor Optimus conspired with his glitch-headed friends and hid you on Earth!”

The twins exchanged uncertain glances.

“You... not talk about Optimus Prime that way,” Jetstorm said.

“Yeah! Optimus Prime saved us. He told, you are deceived by Ministry of Science. But we don’t want you think we’re bad. And Optimus Prime is not bad too,” Jetfire pursed his lips.

“So it *was* Optimus,” Sentinel grumbled. He tried giving Optimus a chance to start a new life, but that slagger just wasn’t capable of staying on the right side of the law. “I knew it was him. All of this Decepticon sympathizing... It certainly didn’t come from nowhere.”

Jetfire’s optics hardened.

“We are not Decepticons,” he uttered slowly. “We helped Autobots. Helped you.”

“If you were Autobots, you would’ve waited for your trial! Or kept out of trouble!” His spark throbbed painfully; it was just like with Elita... The monster he met on Earth wasn’t her; it was an abomination pretending to be her. And now the twins. They were regarding Sentinel with unfamiliar optics, cold and harsh, Autobot blue tainted by some viciousness that didn’t belong there. Decepticons. Changelings posing as the bots he knew.

“You are not Autobots anymore.” Sentinel glared at the Elite Guard emblems on the twins’ hips. “You don’t deserve to wear those.”

And here it was, his proof: the twins hissed, baring their dental plates and curling their fingers. Sentinel recoiled; his battle protocols were still inactive after the EMP, and when he raised his arm

in instinctive defense, his Skyboom Shield didn't appear... But Jetfire and Jetstorm froze. They stared at his gesture, their EM fields rippling with a turmoil of emotion – and then they stood up promptly, transformed and flew off.

“Wow, you're a *jerk*.”

Sentinel spun around, cursing his offline battle protocols; he didn't expect anyone else to be here.

That shrill voice belonged to a tall winged Decepticon. At the first glance Sentinel thought he saw Starscream, but then he noticed the teal and purple paintjob and a slightly curvier frame. It was a femme (as similar as Decepticon femmes were to mechs), she just had the same Seeker body type as Starscream. Was she one of those clones..?

It didn't matter, though, because Sentinel was alone with this femme and had no weapons.

However, the Decepticon didn't make any attempt to attack. She was just sitting on a rock with her legs crossed, studying Sentinel like he was some kind of... organic.

“They saved your life, you know,” she remarked casually. “They listened in to Cybertronian news every day, hiding in the clouds over Sumdac tower, and the moment they learned that you were in trouble, they practically begged me to go and help your sorry aft. So much for Autobot gratitude, I guess.”

“And you agreed? Ha!” Sentinel snorted demonstratively. “It proves that there's some ulterior motive. I will never believe that a Decepticon would help an Autobot. So what're you gonna do now, ask for a ransom? Sell me to the Quints?”

“I doubt anyone would pay money for you.” The femme chuckled, and Sentinel wanted to strangle her right here and now. “In their place I'd pay money to *get rid* of you. If I were alone, I'd have left you to the Quints.” She inspected her claws, which were long and sharp... Sentinel could picture them digging under his armor. “However, the kids seem to like you for some reason, so I advise you to go and apologize to them. They're brooding behind that hill in the distance.”

It had to be some ruse. It had to. If those Decepticon freaks thought they could get a Magnus to bow to them, they came to the wrong bot!

“You won't get anything out of me.” Sentinel growled and began standing up. “I'm Sentinel, Magnus of Cybertron, and I will not take orders from some Decepticon filth who...”

He didn't get to finish this tirade, because there was a hit to his torso, and suddenly Sentinel found himself lying on his back with the femme's heel pressed to his chest. She leaned over him, placing her arms on her knee, and her lips parted in a dangerous smile.

“And I'm Slipstream of Earth, and I don't give a crap about who you are. It was a miracle that you lived till the end of the day, and if you want to continue living, you should consider reevaluating your behavior.”

“Get off, you bitch!” Sentinel punched her in the ankle, but Slipstream's smile only sweetened.

“Oh, I wouldn't do that,” she cooed. “Because I might decide to fly away... And do you know what will happen if I do that?” She grinded her thruster heel against Sentinel's chest, revving her engines – and Sentinel gasped, sensing the heat on his armor. “Isn't that your spark chamber down there?” she purred. “I wonder how fast its casing will melt with a thruster so close to it.”

Sentinel could only bellow futilely, putting his hands away.

“You have no right to treat me that way! I’m the Magnus of Cybertron!”

“Magnus-Shmagnus,” Slipstream shrugged. “Who cares. Right now you’re at my mercy, so consider this: if you behave, you may get to see your precious Cybertron once more. If not, well... I can always try to get the kids to drop you at the Quintessons’ doorstep. You decide what it’ll be.”

Sentinel gritted his dental plates. He wanted to tell this insolent femme everything he thought about her, wanted to keep regal silence – but he also wanted to see Cybertron again. And win this war for the Autobots. They were left leaderless, guideless... Who knew what could be happening in Iacon right now. Panic, disorganization... He needed to go back as soon as possible.

“Fine,” he forced himself to spit out. “I’ll do what you say. Let me go.”

Slipstream sent him the last infuriating smirk, and the weight of her foot disappeared from Sentinel’s chest.

This dirty wench would pay for what she did. Dearly.

Optimus didn’t hesitate to use his permission to explore the city; he was wary at first, expecting danger behind every corner, and the ‘cons did look unhappy to see him, but none of them approached Optimus or showed open hostility. The worst the Prime got were disdainful whispers behind his back, and that he could take. Besides, he needed some distraction to get his mind off the war with the Quintessons. Learning more about the planet and possible escape chances was the best Optimus could do right now.

New Kaon turned out to be much different from what Optimus imagined. The city presented a weird mixture of imperial grandeur and striking disarray. The command headquarters where Optimus lived, the hospital and a couple of other buildings in the center were the only structures that were made well. Their architecture was similar to the towers of Kaon, high and impregnable. But all the other houses were surprisingly small and appeared like they were built in haste, with no regard for beauty or durability. Blind unpainted walls of armored metal were hiding most of them from the passerby, and those Optimus did manage to see had numerous traces of endless repairs and reconstructive works. The general feel of the city could be described in one word: dull. The streets, albeit wide and straight, were littered with garbage. Yet there were colossal statues standing in the squares, and the spiky walls of the command citadel dominated the scenery. Above the roofs at the outskirts Optimus saw a familiar, but unwelcome sight: the looming mass of Trypticon, transported here from Cybertron. That place gave him mixed feelings, so the Prime preferred to turn his back to the former prison.

The citizens of New Kaon, however, left a different impression. None of them was poor or malnourished; they seemed almost out of place on the dirty streets, with their clean armor and confident stride. Not many of them used the roads, though; those who had an aerial altmode obviously opted for flying.

Optimus was watching a pair of Seekers soar in perfect synchrony in the evening sky, when a deep voice boomed behind his back.

“Are you lost, Optimus Prime?”

“Huh?” Optimus turned around and smiled, like he met an old friend. “Oh, hello, Lugnut.” His smile wavered when he remembered that they weren’t in the jungle anymore. How would Lugnut act around him here? “No, I’m not lost, I was just... looking around. How are you?”

He blurted it out without thinking, and now Optimus was unsure it was a right thing to say. Would Lugnut consider him intrusive? Optimus could never read his expressions.

Fortunately, his fears were unfounded.

“I am well. I’m walking home, so that I can meet my beloved when she comes back from the meeting.”

“You live in the city?” Optimus’s curiosity took ahold of him. “I thought you belonged in the citadel.”

Lugnut’s optic shutters closed and opened repeatedly. Optimus wasn’t sure what it meant.

“Headquarters are not for living. Only important visitors who don’t have a house on New Kaon live there. Lord Megatron’s apartment is there too; he’s the only one who resides there permanently. Our great and noble master wants to always be close to the command center. He works days and nights to bring us to our glorious future!”

Lugnut’s voice rose to that reverent chant he always used when talking about his lord; Optimus saw some Decepticon walk out of an alleyway, see Lugnut and quickly turn back. He suppressed a giggle.

“Can I see your house?” Optimus asked. He knew that he was probably overstepping his boundaries, but he was interested, and he felt sort of safe around Lugnut. At least he could be sure that this mech will never disobey Megatron’s order not to harm him.

Lugnut paused, seemingly confused by the question, but then shrugged.

“Why not? Come, Autobot.”

Lugnut’s house turned out to be one of those inconspicuous standalone buildings that Optimus took for poor. But when they entered it, the Prime realized that he was wrong. He was used to Autobot cities, and the Autobots lived all together in huge complexes with a lot of apartments. Rich Autobots had larger and better furnished ones, poor students like Optimus himself owned tiny flats. It was considered good for the community and for teaching the doctrine of everybody being parts of a larger whole. Smaller buildings were either stores or barracks.

Apparently, Decepticons had a different idea of good living conditions: they built separate houses. With high fences and real weapons and traps guarding them from unwanted intruders. Optimus could only gawk at Lugnut as the huge warrior allowed the security system to scan his energy signature and registered Optimus as a visitor. It was like entering a little fortress, and Optimus wasn’t sure he could ever live like that, separated from others and secluded behind thick walls.

Inside, however, the house turned out to be... appealing? It was definitely not what Optimus associated with evil Decepticons: large, pretty normal rooms with pretty normal couches, chairs around the table and a giant working console. The only purely “Decepticon” thing here was an arsenal of various weaponry that took an entire wall; well, that and the dim lighting.

“Why do you always keep the lights at minimum?” Optimus asked, standing in the middle of the main hall awkwardly as Lugnut was clicking on an energon dispenser’s panel.

“Because we have to conserve energon,” Lugnut explained like it was the most basic of ideas. “We learned to value every drop in the depths of the mines and in the cells under the arena.”

“But you’re making a mix, right?” Optimus pointed at the dispenser. “With additives? This doesn’t conserve energon.”

Lugnut thrust his chest forward proudly.

“This is a luxury we earned after we broke the shackles of Autobot oppression! We have a right to enjoy the prizes of our righteous battles!”

Optimus had a lot to say to that (not counting bizarre energon conservation logic), but held himself back; it was unwise to start an argument in a Decepticon’s house.

“Then why are your houses so poorly built? I mean, I saw so many structures in the city that need renovation,” he corrected himself quickly, but Lugnut didn’t take any offence.

“They are temporary,” he replied easily. “We don’t need to settle down here, because we’ll be going home. Wise and glorious Lord Megatron will lead us to the victory, and we will retake Cybertron!”

Optimus gaped at him, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“But... But you’ve been living here for millions of years! Isn’t that a long time enough to begin building proper houses?”

“We don’t need houses here,” Lugnut repeated stubbornly. “We’ll be going home.”

“What is *he* doing here?”

Optimus jumped and turned around cautiously, spark freezing in his chest. While talking with the warrior he forgot just whose consort Lugnut was; consorts usually lived together, right?

Idiot, idiot Prime! How would he get out of here now?

“Beloved!” Lugnut hurried to his lady, but Strika ignored him; her dark red optics – the only expressive parts of her crude face – were nailing Optimus to the floor.

“Why is it, that in every place where I need no Autobots except for dead ones, I see *you*?” she snarled, and Optimus wished he could grow even smaller. Somehow Strika terrified him more than Megatron ever did.

“I’m sorry,” he squeaked, and hated how meek he sounded. “I’ll leave.”

Strika looked like she had a lot to comment on Optimus’s presence in general, but she remained silent – just scrutinized him as he hurried to the exit, leaving Lugnut to blabber explanations.

That last notion actually made him smile, if a bit nervously. It sounded like he had just become a reason for a family quarrel.

Optimus hoped to sneak into his room and not irritate anybody else this solar cycle, but alas, he didn’t have such luck.

“Optimus.” Megatron caught him in a hallway, and the Prime sighed inwardly before turning to face the warlord. He couldn’t ignore Megatron, could he?

“Hello,” he said, putting on a neutrally polite mien.

“Returning from a walk? Would you mind joining me for the evening’s energon?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?” Optimus rasped poignantly. “Sure, why not. Lead the way.”

Megatron frowned at his tone, but didn’t answer. Instead he simply nodded and, well, led the way.

The Decepticon lord’s apartment was located on the same floor, but in a different wing. Optimus expected something grand or splendid – and he was partially right: Megatron’s quarters were tall and spacious, with polished floor and surfaces. The simple but well-crafted furniture certainly betrayed its owner’s good taste, but there was nothing particularly lavish. In fact, these rooms had less air of welcome about them than Lugnut and Strika’s smaller but cozier home.

“Sit down.” Megatron walked past the dispenser and entered a password to open a built-in cupboard.

“I thought you invited me to energon,” Optimus muttered, climbing up on a too-large chair.

“Let’s have something better instead. Ever tried Intelian oil? Earth’s fossil fuel can’t even compare to it.” He took out two goblets and a cube filled with thick dark liquid.

Optimus watched as the oil was poured into his goblet, physically sensing the last drops of his patience running out. He shouldn’t start a scandal right in Megatron’s quarters in the very heart of his empire; he should act grateful and earn his trust... But the warlord’s nonchalance got on his nerves. Optimus’s brethren were dying, fighting the Quintessons with all they had, and Optimus was stuck here, forced to obey the Decepticon leader’s whims and drink fancy oil blends with him, like some toy Megatron brought back for entertainment.

Optimus didn’t take the goblet.

“Cut it out!” He slammed his fist into the table. “Enough with these games. First you give me permission to move about without supervision and take me to a strategy meeting, now you’re sharing drinks with me. What am I to you?! A plaything? A prisoner?”

“Neither.” Megatron put his own cup aside. “I would call you... my guest.”

“‘Guest’?” Optimus laughed. “A guest can leave whenever he wants; but I can’t leave, can I?” He laughed again, bitterly, when Megatron didn’t respond. “What do you want of me, Megatron? Why did you bring me here? None among your officers understands or likes it.”

“It doesn’t matter what they like,” Megatron’s lips curved in a disdainful scowl, but it softened immediately when he continued: “I wanted you to see New Kaon. To walk among us and see us for yourself. Tell me, Optimus, are we really monsters from your legends? Do we not deserve dignified life on our homeworld?”

“You do,” the Prime agreed quietly. “And you aren’t. But it doesn’t excuse your actions – or your ideas. Look, I firmly believe that we all deserve dignified life – both Decepticons *and* Autobots. But the fact that I feel compassion for your people doesn’t mean that I’ll let you to hurt *mine*.”

“It might be easy for you to imagine that happy life side-by-side, Autobot. You are an idealistic youth who was brought online after the Great War; you didn’t live in your so-called Golden Age. I literally broke the Decepticons out of the Autobots’ chains, and I won’t let it be for nothing.”

Optimus sighed; it all came back to that argument. Megatron’s obstinate as pit paranoia, fear that clouded his vision and withheld him from seeing the possibilities. Or maybe he didn’t want to see them? Maybe it wasn’t fear; maybe it was an old megalomaniac’s desire to control and dominate

over everything. Such things took ages to grow and ripe, and they couldn't be shattered by a couple of conversations. Why was Optimus even wasting his time trying to reason with someone who didn't want to listen to reason?

Taken over by melancholy, Optimus took his goblet and sipped from it. The oil was delicious; tangy and piquant, it tingled his oral receptors and left a pleasant aftertaste. Kliks ticked by in a silence that was strangely... comfortable? The unfinished dispute hung in the air, tinting the mood with faint dejection, but didn't ruin it. Optimus was sort of used to this reticence; it was based on something he knew and understood, and it didn't prevent him from enjoying Megatron's company.

And he *did* enjoy Megatron's company. It was probably the weirdest revelation Optimus had ever had, but he couldn't deny it, and, frankly speaking, he didn't want to.

"Do you still wish I were a Decepticon?" He asked, small smile playing on his lips. His cup was almost empty, and Optimus felt a little light-headed. "I mean, such an idealistic peace-born sparkling like me among your seasoned warriors?"

Megatron's returned smile sent a wave of warmth down his frame.

"I do." Was it that accursed voice again? Megatron must've been using that special tone of his, that throaty purr that turned Optimus's knees to jelly. "In fact, that's my secret evil plan. To make you stay of your own volition."

"I always knew that was how you seduced... loyal bots to your side," Optimus murmured, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks. "By pretending to be nice and sweet-talking in that voice of yours."

"Oh? You like my voice, little Prime?" Suddenly Megatron's face was close – too close – but Optimus wasn't afraid. "Want me to say anything... special?"

It was a moment for Optimus to make a decision; he paused, hands tightening on his goblet and thoughts racing in his mind. Should he indulge himself? Should he commit the crime of treason again? Fraternize with an enemy, offer himself to the very mech he was supposed to fight?

On the other hand, he had already done that. What was there to lose?

Optimus put the goblet on the table. The oil was of excellent quality and burned fast; he wasn't drunk of affected by emotions he wasn't able to control. What Optimus was doing now was his conscious decision, and he wanted to assure this. Something fluttered in his stomach – the jolts of anticipation – but there was no fear in him; his hands rose and cupped the sides of Megatron's helmet, mapping the unfamiliar curves.

"Just tell me whatever you want," he murmured and brought their lips together.

The kiss was as passionate and intoxicating as the ones they shared in the cave, Megatron practically devouring his mouth, conquering it like he would a new land. Yet here he met no foes, only a welcoming glossa, greedy and demanding. Optimus's fingers tightened on Megatron's helm decorations, forcing it closer; his head was spinning, engine revving loud and indecently. Optimus had nothing to lose, and he refused to be ashamed of his desire – not after everything he went through. There were no Academy teachers watching him and no High Command to condemn him, he was free and wasn't going to miss what good his life brought him, no matter how unbelievable it was.

"Eager, aren't you, little Prime?" Megatron hummed between kisses, oral lubricant glistening on his lips. "So feisty, so receptive... Your Autobots don't even realize what they lost."

They didn't lose me, Optimus wanted to retort, but he was distracted once more by that wonderful glossa. This time he tried to retaliate and bit Megatron's lip, wringing a groan out of him. Optimus ran his tongue over the Decepticon's dental plates, feeling those dangerous fangs and trembling with thrill at the thought of them on his throat cables.

It was outrageous, how fast he got riled up just from the kissing, but Megatron wasn't in the mood to linger. In an instance Optimus was lifted in the air, strong arms holding him against the grey chestplate, and the walk to the berthroom felt more like a run.

There Megatron sat down on his berth, Optimus in his lap, and they locked lips again, every next kiss sloppier and hastier.

"Maybe I should use the approach your porn videos ascribe to me," the warlord growled into his audial, tongue tracing up the heated antenna. "Seduce you to my side. Keep you here forever." A bite to his finial, and Optimus cried out, clutching at Megatron's shoulders. "Forge you into a good little Decepticon. *Frag* you into a good little Decepticon." Optimus moaned, every note of that sinful deep voice resonating through his body. "Mark you with my badge and take you every night. *I found you first!*" Another bite – to his neck – and Optimus was keening, wordlessly begging for more, please, just don't stop..! "*I claimed you first! I would steal you away from the Autobots and make them regret it, make them pay for everything.*"

There were no coherent protests in Optimus's mind anymore, not with the assault on all of his senses, not with the things Megatron was saying – dark, wicked things, but oh so satisfying! Optimus melted in that overflow of adoration, and his anger – at whom, he couldn't tell – merged with his lust, enflaming him like a furnace.

At some point their interface panels retracted, and now Optimus was grinding against the hot connector, his port's lubricants leaking and smearing all over it. He remembered that delicious stretch, that impossible fullness, and he wanted, needed it again, to have the emptiness inside him filled and used and sated. His port seemed to recall the settings, and when Megatron's fingers entered him, it didn't take long to prepare him.

But instead of pinning Optimus to the mattress and plunging inside, Megatron lay back, making Optimus straddle him.

"I want to see you well," the warlord answered to the unspoken question, smirking. But if he intended to embarrass Optimus, he miscalculated: the young Prime wasn't going to shy away. Megatron wanted a good view? Optimus would give him a view!

Rising over the Decepticon's hips, Optimus grabbed the spike, stroking the bumps and ridges with his fingers, aligned its tip with his port's opening and began sinking down.

The very first moments made his cooling fans screech; he wanted to go slow, to tease Megatron and boast his composure, but in truth he *had to* go slow, because it was simply too much. Optimus could feel every caliper dilate and give in, receiving the spike deeper, and saw his abdominal plates bulge outwards, the seams between them opening up. And Megatron was watching him, red optics smoldering in the dark of the berthroom, focused on Optimus, burning him... Yet Megatron kept still, allowing Optimus to choose his own pace, until finally – finally! – he was fully seated, the spike buried in him to the hilt.

Optimus paused, mouth agape and thighs quivering with strain. He felt like he was skewered, impaled on a scalding hot rod that he won't be able to put out – but Megatron's hands descended on his hips, almost wrapping around his waist. Megatron began moving him up, slowly but steadily – and then, when the gaping emptiness inside made Optimus whine, pushing him down. The pace

became faster as Optimus's port adjusted, Megatron's every thrust a bolt of sharp pleasure that pierced him right to the spark, and Optimus rode him, basking in the attention and his own pleasure.

"That's it, Optimus." That voice flowed into his audials, soaking him in its rich undertones. "You look so good like this... In bliss and abandon."

It shouldn't have made him proud – but it did, so Optimus arched his back, making the bulge in his stomach more distinct, and rubbed it, earning a hungry roar of Megatron's engine.

Soon the Prime couldn't hold himself upright anymore. He fell onto Megatron, clawing at his plating weakly, giving himself into Megatron's hands as the warlord took him, ramming into him relentlessly. It felt divine – to be free at last, to let go and permit another to guide him.

"Yes! Oh, oh..." He moaned, rolling his hips in encouragement. "Oh-a-Allspark, yes!"

Optimus's climax caught him unawares: his vocalizer froze, giving out nothing but static, and electric spasms went through his frame, EM field exploding with charge. Megatron groaned to that, but it wasn't enough to push him over the edge. Optimus slumped against his torso as the warlord chased his own release, and whimpered when his oversensitized nodes were shocked by a new wave of charge. Megatron's spike erupted inside him, coolant pressing against his inner walls and spurting out, but this time the locks clicked in vain.

Optimus sighed, nuzzling the grey plating underneath his cheek. He wanted nothing but to keep lying like this, surrounded by warmth and content of intertwined EM fields, to forget about the outer world for a while and just rest happily. But of course Megatron, the ever-vile Decepticon, had to ruin everything.

"Optimus." A broad palm stroked his back. "Time to get up."

Right, his CPU reminded him. Decepticons and post-coital cuddling didn't mix. He tried not to feel upset; Megatron had a point, it was just a casual frag. You don't snuggle and recharge together with such partners. He definitely didn't want to do that with Megatron of all people. Interfacing Optimus could explain, but there was no excuse for getting all cozy.

"Yeah," he mumbled, writhing slightly. His entire body felt heavy and clumsy. "Just... give me a minute."

In a minute he did manage to stand up, wincing at the sticky mess between his legs.

"Can I use your washracks?"

"Sure. The door at the corner."

"Thanks," Optimus said, heading in that direction and deliberately not looking at Megatron, whose unreadable gaze he could feel with his back. There was nothing to be ashamed of. It was a casual frag, people did that all the time. Optimus simply had fun, no strings attached.

That's how Megatron regarded it, wasn't it?

Part III, Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! :)

Sorry I poofed the last week, but I started with a new job last Monday, and that week turned out to be too hectic and exhausting for me to write anything.

To be frank, I'm not sure I'll be able to keep up the weekly schedule now. I'll try, but no promises.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Decepticons decided not to join the Autobot-Quintesson war. Optimus learned of this a couple of days later; he wasn't invited to any more strategy meetings, and the news was delivered by Megatron – in a casual and nonchalant manner.

Optimus wasn't sure how he felt about that. Certainly it was good that the Decepticons didn't bring more trouble when the Autobot Commonwealth had its hands full... But the perspective of Optimus's homeworld being either conquered by unpredictable Quintessons or attacked by the Decepticon forces after it was devastated by war wasn't more appealing. Especially if the 'cons ended up mastering transwarp technology.

All Optimus's attempts to infiltrate the science labs had been futile so far; the research complex was too heavily guarded, and Shockwave's tracker was still sending signals from somewhere inside Optimus's body. He had to find it, get rid of it and then sneak into the labs. And after he erased all the data concerning the transwarp technology, he had to grab the plasma dynamic thruster and make his escape. If it was possible, of course.

The alternative was to blow up the lab, destroy the thruster and face the Decepticons' wrath. Not a very attractive prospect, but if it'd be the only option... Optimus was ready to do it. It was the least he could do to atone for helping to free Megatron – or at least that was what he told himself.

Strangely enough, it was hard to feel guilty for that. At some moment Optimus realized that didn't regret helping Megatron on Quintessa; he aided another living being to escape horrible death – certainly it was the right thing to do. And Shockwave's report during that first strategy meeting eased Optimus's guilt for his own escape: the Quintessons attacked before the shuttle with the prisoners even reached Quintessa. His inner voice's whispers about atonement felt hollow.

Was he becoming cynical? Was he becoming selfish? Optimus asked himself these questions as he lay in his berth during New Kaon's long nights. Did Megatron... deprave him?

Would he ever be accepted if he returned to Cybertron? Damn, Optimus wasn't sure he'd accept *himself* if he was in the other Autobots' place. A loyal Autobot would never interface with the Decepticon lord willingly, nor would he come back for more.

And Optimus did come back. One night turned into two, then into many. It was like running down a steep slope, every next step driving him lower, making him fall faster as his spark pounded like mad. He was going against everything he was taught, soiling the title of an Autobot soldier and Ultra Magnus's pupil. Yet he couldn't stop, and couldn't force himself to care.

He had nothing to lose anyway. He was alone and desperate, confined on a planet full of enemies. Despite all the fancy words Megatron devised, Optimus knew perfectly well what he essentially was: a prisoner. Why not make the best of it? Kup had fun with his Decepticon guy and remembered the tryst fondly, so why in the pits not? So he served as Megatron's berthwarmer; but Megatron was just as much of a berthwarmer for him. They were using each other for mutual pleasure and satisfaction. It was simple and brazen, but sincere.

Besides, he kinda liked Megatron, in physical sense. The mech was too hot for his own good, and he was more than happy to share his rich experience with the young and innocent Autobot – who, in turn, was eager to learn.

Although some things didn't come to him that easily.

Currently he was writhing on Megatron's berth, biting his hand and clawing at the mattress as his connector disappeared in Megatron's mouth. Slim silvery thighs were twitching, but couldn't really move, because the warlord's broad palms were holding them down securely. Their size difference wasn't too big for Optimus's spike not to hit the back of a throat, but Megatron still managed to take Optimus's length with surprising ease. Now Optimus could feel that throat contract around him, and the Prime let out a muffled scream, fingers digging into the padding.

Megatron *chuckled* with Optimus's spike still buried in his intake, wringing a broken sob out of his helpless Autobot... Who turned out to be not so helpless after all, because his hands came to rest on Megatron's helmet, grabbing those cheek guards Optimus grew fond of, and pulled him closer. Megatron didn't resist; he hummed and loosened his grip on Optimus's thighs, allowing the Prime to move at last – and move he did, starting a quick, hurried rhythm, too consumed by chasing his overload to bother with anything else.

This was how Megatron liked him the best. Optimus was kind of cute when he was confused and embarrassed, and Megatron immensely enjoyed playing on these emotions, but he never forgot the Optimus that had truly caught his eye for the first time: a fierce and clever warrior, artificial wings behind his back and Magnus Hammer in his hands, conquering the sky that wasn't even his element, standing against an enemy even Ultra Magnus himself never faced alone. That Optimus wasn't shy; that Optimus wasn't thinking about what was forbidden or not.

Megatron thought he could see the glimpse of that godlike warrior when Optimus arched underneath him, unbridled, sparks flying over his seams and spike erupting coolant. It smoothed over Megatron's mouth with tanginess and cold, but the taste was almost pleasant in its familiarity. The warlord swallowed the last drops and let Optimus's spike slip out of his mouth to cool down on its own. Optimus hissed as the air blew over his heated equipment, sensitivity increased to nigh-pain without natural cooling mechanism, but Megatron personally believed that it added an edge to plain normal interfacing; besides, this way one could be aroused pretty soon again, and he had big plans for the evening.

Apparently, Optimus did too, because he smiled lopsidedly and rose to his knees, small hands pushing at Megatron's chestplate.

"Come on," he urged, a little annoyed when it didn't give, "I want to return the favor."

"I'm afraid you're overestimating your capacities," Megatron laughed, but allowed himself to be arrange on his back, Optimus settling between his legs.

"Your loss," the Prime retorted, hand running up Megatron's straining connector. "I guess I'll have to improvise."

Contrary to the bravery in his voice, he did hesitate when he had Megatron's spike right in front of his face. Knowing that the bot was a virgin before their spontaneous romp in the cave, the warlord rested on his elbows, giving Optimus time and freedom to explore the unknown territory at his own pace.

But oh, what he lacked in skill, he made up for with genuineness. The first tentative touches of those tiny fingers were feather-like, each stroke sending an electrifying shiver down Megatron's spine. It had been a long time since he had been with someone so inexperienced, but it didn't feel boring or sloppy; Optimus's unsure caresses ignited his core with fire that even the most skilled lover failed to awaken, and when Optimus's apt little tongue flicked over the head, Megatron barely managed to stop himself from overloading at the sight alone.

There was something wrong in the way he reacted to this Autobot, but then even that alarming thought was driven away by careful sweeps of Optimus's glossa. He couldn't fit much of Megatron's spike in his mouth, so he concentrated on licking and kissing along the length, trailing the thick conjoined cables and tasting the electricity on his tongue.

It was just the novelty of it, Megatron told himself as he clenched his dental plates, unable to tear his gaze from the tantalizing spectacle. His engine was roaring, and his fans screeched from overwork. And Optimus seemed oblivious to it, the sly glitch, engrossed in his task of driving Megatron insane – because doubtlessly that was what he was aiming for! Megatron saw his own spike glisten with oral lubricant, bathing in the blue light of Optimus's optics – and then the little bastard wrapped his lips around the head, taking in as much as he could, and hummed, revving his engine at the same moment.

Megatron overloaded with a roar, coolant shooting into Optimus's mouth and spluttering all over his face when the startled Prime recoiled. A dozen red warnings overflowed Megatron's HUD, complaining about overheating, but the warlord couldn't even fully grasp the glyphs' meaning, still out of it after the sudden and violent climax. Finally he managed to pull himself together, glanced at Optimus – and chuckled.

“Not funny,” Optimus pouted, wiping the coolant off his cheeks and optics. “I didn't expect it.”

“You took a spike in your mouth and didn't expect your partner to overload?” Megatron's grin only widened. “You are *seriously* underestimating your abilities, Optimus Prime. Or you're just that pure and I'm corrupting you.”

“You're corrupting *everything*. You're the evil Decepticon warlord.” In contrast with his harsh words, Optimus was smiling. “But jokes aside, next time a little warning, please?”

“Sure, sure,” Megatron waved his hand. “Take this ‘surprise’ as a compliment.”

“Yeah, well, I'll go wash your compliment off my face now, if you'll excuse me.” Optimus flung his legs over the berth's edge and jumped to the floor. His feet didn't reach it when he was sitting.

Megatron sprawled on his berth, optics following Optimus's back until he disappeared in the washracks. The Autobot grew incredibly bold lately, treating Megatron's private washrack like his own, but the Decepticon found it endearing rather than irritating. Optimus was like that small feline Earth Internet was full of: when he grew accustomed to a new location and company, he seemed to become comfortable and unceremonious around them.

“You are losing it, my lord! You're going soft on an enemy!”

Megatron frowned, staring at the ceiling, one of his latest conversations with Strika coming to his

mind.

“He is a much more capable leader than Sentinel,” Megatron explained. “It’s in our best interests to keep Optimus away from Cybertron, so there is no chance he could wring the power out of Sentinel’s hands.”

“Then kill him!” Strika didn’t even try to hide her fury. “If he’s so dangerous – and I agree with you here – get rid of him once and for all!”

Megatron frowned back then too.

“That would be a waste. It is wiser to convert him to our side.”

“I believe it was you who told me Optimus Prime was unfalteringly loyal.” Strika put her hands on her hips, for once trying to use her superior size to look impressive. “How are you going to convert him? By fragging him through every surface?”

Megatron’s optics narrowed.

“You’re forgetting your boundaries,” he said, voice low and even – but that was enough. Strika’s shoulders sagged, and she changed her posture immediately, demonstrating polite obedience.

“Yes, my lord. Forgive me.” She sounded honest, but when she dared to peer at Megatron again, the same glint of stubbornness was still present in her optics. “I will not question your orders, but it is my duty to warn you according to my observations. Please consider your plans regarding the Autobot.”

And Megatron considered them, and then reconsidered. He couldn’t deny that there was sense in Strika’s warnings: Optimus would pose less danger to the Decepticons dead than alive. But perhaps Megatron chose the perfect words to describe his standing: it would be a waste. The universe would lose something infinitely valuable if Optimus were to die. A talented commander; a great warrior.

A smart and resourceful conversation partner.

An Autobot who believed in peace between their races.

That last idea still rang unnatural. Weird. To be frank, Megatron had nothing against individual Autobots; he was able to appreciate their talents and use them, if the Autobot in question was gullible enough to be persuaded to switch sides. But Autobots as a whole, as a system, still awoke deep-rooted disgust and resentment in him. They were like a pandemic of cosmic rust, ever threatening just by existing, and Megatron couldn’t recharge in peace knowing that they were there.

Now that Optimus was isolated from the source of the disease, he could be converted. Megatron had to believe in that.

While Optimus wasn’t allowed into the places he needed to reach the most (like the spaceport and the labs), he was allowed to walk freely everywhere else, and he used it to his advantage. New Kaon wasn’t that big of a city, and the Decepticons were cautious and mistrustful. There had to be some secret ways of travelling between the command center and the most important facilities, and Optimus was determined to find them.

That's why his joy was immeasurable when he stumbled upon a library.

The "Grand Archive of Kaon", as the rusty plate boasted, was a dull grey building similar to all permanently temporary houses on this planet. It had a defense system too, but it beeped invitingly after it scanned Optimus's energy signature, and the doors opened before him. Apparently, libraries weren't listed among potentially dangerous places.

Smirking inwardly, Optimus entered the large round hall. It was dark, as was every other room here on this planet, and the lack of windows didn't help the case; the console screens at the walls were black and lifeless.

It was empty, too.

Optimus walked to the reception desk, looking around slowly. The soft clang of his steps echoed around the hall, resonating above, under the arched ceiling. The console at the reception desk was alight, but in the otherwise complete stillness of the archive it left an eerie impression.

Optimus cleared his throat.

"Hello?" he called, standing on his toes and peeking over the too-tall desk at the doorway behind it. "Is anybody here?"

Silence. Optimus waited for a click; he thought he heard some noise from the unseen area beyond, but apart from that he was ignored. Unsure, Optimus walked around the desk and dared to step into the other room.

"Hello?" He reset his optics, adjusting them to even weaker lighting. Now he could see the outlines of bookcases – rows and rows of shelves disappearing in the gloom, but what was supposed to be a citadel of order was, in fact, a mess: data chips and hard drives were littering the floor, some put into piles, some scattered or broken. Optimus scowled. Either the Decepticons had no respect for knowledge, or...

"Autobot!"

Optimus jolted and glanced to his left, meeting a pair of glowing red slits. The Decepticon appeared out of an aisle, and he didn't look happy: his green blocky form, which belonged to some heavy jet, judging by the small stubs of wings, was tense, shoulders rolled forward and fists clenched. A heap of hard drives he was carrying was dropped to the floor immediately, and Optimus flinched at the sound.

"Careful!" He raised his hands to demonstrate his peaceful intentions, but his optics were glued to the poor hard drives. "They could be damaged if dropped like that!"

"Not your business," the Decepticon hissed. "I'm the librarian here, not you."

Okay, enough was enough. Optimus wasn't what one would call a nerd, but seeing the precious data storages thrown around like garbage filled him with rage he had hard time to control.

"A librarian treats knowledge with respect," he snapped, lowering his hands. "As do all civilized creatures." He leaned down, keeping the movement gradual and deliberate in order not to provoke the librarian, and picked two drives that fell near his feet. "Here."

To his surprise, the Decepticon backed off a little, eyeing Optimus's outstretched hands like they were poisonous organics.

“Well, go tell Motormaster that,” he muttered. “I’d love to see his face when Megatron’s pet Autobot starts to lecture him about behaving in a library.” He snatched the drives from Optimus’s hands at last and turned around abruptly, beginning to walk down the aisle.

Optimus grabbed some more data discs from the floor and hurried after the Decepticon. Despite all his angry posturing, he didn’t seem truly dangerous, and the way he acted now resembled an attempt to flee.

“Wait! What was that about Motormaster?” Optimus remembered the mech – a tall brute, savage even when disguised as an Autobot. He was kept in Trypticon with the rest of his team, so it stood to reason that he was set free when the former prison transwarped here.

“Stop following me!” The Decepticon yelled, voice breaking into a squeal. “Stop questioning me! What do you want here? Just leave me alone!”

“I only wanted to use the library,” Optimus breathed out, having to almost run now that the other mech sped up. “I hoped you could help me; you’re the librarian here, right?”

Finally, the Decepticon stopped (perhaps because there was a wall in front of him) and spun around. His optics glowed pale orange.

“Yes,” he rasped, and Optimus was flabbergasted by the amount of bitterness in this little word. “And I don’t need an Autobot pet to remind me of that. Go, read whatever you want; until Motormaster and his cronies come back to trash this place again, that is. I don’t have time to deal with you.”

Oh! Now it was becoming clearer.

“Did they do this?” Optimus gestured to the disarray around them. “Are they bothering you?”

“No,” the librarian hissed, crouching and tightening his dark green plating. “Now go away.” He turned his armored back to Optimus once more and shoved the data drives he had in his hands to the nearest shelf. Then he proceeded to pick the info chips from the floor and put them into the bookcases without any system or care.

Optimus watched him for a while, acutely sensing the unease in the librarian’s EM field.

“I can help you,” he offered at last. “But if you put the drives randomly like this, how will you be able to find them?”

The Decepticon’s shoulders rose and fell in a shrug.

“Who cares,” he grumbled.

“You’re not a very good librarian, do you know that?”

“Yes! Thanks for telling me!” Now the ‘con was shrieking; he even ceased his ministrations and brought himself to meet Optimus’s gaze. “I’m also not a very good soldier, apparently, so there is always some smartass ready to rub it into my face! And now I even have an Autobot telling me slag!”

“Um...” Optimus squirmed, the outburst actually hitting him more than he thought. “I... Sorry. Look, let me just help. As an apology?”

“I don’t need no apologies,” the librarian mumbled, cringing. “But okay, whatever. Just get those

things off the floor, if you have nothing better to do.”

They worked in silence for a while, Optimus contemplating his next step carefully. This Decepticon was strange... unlike all those he'd seen before. And too high-strung.

Perhaps he should start from the very beginning.

“I’m Optimus, by the way. Optimus Prime.” He cast a sidelong glance at his companion. “What’s your name?”

The Decepticon’s short wings twitched.

“Scratch.”

Optimus held back a surprised exclamation.

“Was that... a name you chose?” he couldn’t help but ask. Megatron said the Decepticons chose their names, but who would willingly call himself Scratch?

“I hoped nobody else would want it,” Scratch muttered, his wings drooping. “So I wouldn’t have to fight for it. I’m a coward, you know,” he added almost aggressively, checking out Optimus’s reaction.

“No, I don’t,” Optimus replied softly. “But I don’t think one should dismiss themselves like this. Fearing for your life is normal.”

“Ha! Typical Autobot thing to say,” Scratch raised his chin, the arrogant gesture a bit bizarre compared to the constant flutter of fear contaminating his EM field. “That’s normal to you because you all are cowards.”

“An odd accusation coming from someone who openly calls himself a coward.”

“I know what I am.” Scratch kicked a data disc under the shelf, as if punishing it. “I’m not proud of it. That’s why I’m stuck here in this slagging dust box, cleaning up after Motormaster’s rampages.”

Optimus paused, choosing the words meticulously.

“I could... talk to Megatron about this. About Motormaster, I mean. I’m sure Megatron can rein him i...”

“No!” Scratch dropped the data discs he was holding, the last remnants of his composure torn to shreds. “No, please! Not to Megatron!” He dashed to Optimus, hands trembling as they rose but stopped in mid-air helplessly. “I barely got this job, this is the last place where I can go, and if he learns that I fail even at that..! I don’t want to Straxus’s smelting pits!”

Optimus just stared.

“Surely... They wouldn’t execute you for being bullied?” He uttered carefully, but Scratch’s face told him everything.

And here he thought he learned that the Decepticons weren’t the monsters from the children’s books.

“Please, Optimus Prime!” the librarian’s voice sweetened to the point of nausea, desperate notes breaking through the pathetic facade. “Please, I beg you! You’re a nice person, I know you are, a true Autobot! You won’t tell on me, will you?”

“Alright, alright, I won’t!” Optimus shivered, the nervous wreck of a Decepticon looming over him even as he tried to grovel. “Please stop.”

Thankfully, Scratch did stop. He eased back, continuing to murmur praises and pleasantries, leaving Optimus to lean on the bookcase, his knees suddenly weak and spark beating against its casing on the verge of pain.

Optimus didn’t retire to his quarters this evening. His head felt heavy and overstuffed, so he decided to take a walk to clear his mind.

New Kaon’s night wasn’t that dark, the planet’s three moons giving plenty of light, but compared to ever-illuminated Iacon it still looked bleak, like some isolated village where everyone go to recharge at sunset. It seemed empty, too: most Decepticons preferred flying to walking, as a result giving Optimus the space and quiet he sought.

During his stay among Decepticons he mostly met people whom he could call... normal. Megatron was nice to him, and the others, although they more or less openly disliked him, were pretty civil. Between themselves they didn’t appear that much different from the Autobots or humans, really. Optimus grew used to it. Optimus accepted it.

And then he found out that the ‘cons were mistreating their own people for being ‘weak’.

Scratch was seriously frightened today; pits, he was terrified by the possibility of Megatron learning that he failed his job! A job that he hated, that he wasn’t suited for, and that was a degrading penalty for some abstract cowardice. He allowed himself to be bullied and was driven to a high-breakdown at the mere idea that it could get known. What kind of twisted culture would imply this? And how would a job at the archive be considered a disgrace?

Suddenly Optimus became aware of the fact that he’d never seen an old or sick Decepticon; every mech or femme he spotted walked around with their heads up, weapons polished and their stride confident. There was something off about it. In addition, they couldn’t all be some kind of... unmarred aristocracy. There had to be mechs who made everything on New Kaon run smoothly. Workers, cooks, clerks, librarians... Where were all these people? A state populated only by warriors couldn’t function!

He didn’t notice that he stopped in the middle of the street, still immersed in his thoughts – and then a sound of a rolling vehicle caught his attention. There was a screech of brakes, and Optimus blinked, staring at the windshield of a heavy-loaded transporter. At first he didn’t understand what was wrong with it – apart from its very presence on New Kaon’s streets – and then it hit him.

There was a driver behind the steering wheel.

Optimus didn’t get a good look at the creature – he just noticed that it was a humanoid about twice as small as an average Autobot – because the driver hit the accelerator, bypassed Optimus and proceeded to fly at the speed that was too much for the clumsy transport. Snapped out of his stupor, Optimus transformed and followed the vehicle.

“Wait! Stop!” He caught up with the strange truck and leaped into its way, arms outstretched. “Please, I mean you no harm!”

The driver - now Optimus saw that it was a mechanoid, albeit of unknown form and design – sat frozen in his seat, large opaque optics widened in what Optimus recognized as mortal fear, and

then he hurried out of the vehicle and fell on his knees.

“Please forgive me, sir!” He begged in a thickly accented voice. “I wasn’t expecting anyone in the street, please, I will be careful next time! Please, I’m so sorry!” He clasped his four-fingered hands, strange segmented crest on his head moving up and down.

“It’s... It’s okay, I’m not offended, I just...” Optimus went down on one knee and gave the creature the gentlest smile he could manage. “I was just taken unawares, that’s all.” He paused, knowing that he shouldn’t put more pressure on the poor mechanoid, should comfort him and be considerate, but the question burned his glossa, and he *needed* to know. “Who are you?”

The question seemed to only confuse and scare the creature more.

“M-me, sir?” Round white optics shimmered; he was nearly panicking now. “I... I am your humble servant, sir!” He blurted out eagerly, as if finding the answer to a riddle. “I can’t leave my work now, but if you wish, I can come to your house during my downtime and do... whatever tasks you have for me. I will pay you for my offence, sir, don’t you worry!”

He was blabbering now, and the more Optimus listened, the graver his face became, until all reasonable thoughts gave place for simple, seething rage. He rose to his feet, shocking the mechanoid, transformed into his altmode and drove off.

“Megatron!”

Optimus didn’t care what time it was, and didn’t care that he had just barged into the Decepticon leader’s private office. He stormed through the room and slammed his hands into the desk so hard, the datapads rattled.

“Megatron! Who in the name of the Allspark are the aliens that work as night drivers here?!”

The warlord lifted his gaze from the datapad he was reading, visibly unimpressed with the outburst.

“They are just that: workers. Why should it concern you?”

Optimus’s optics flashed white.

“Why?! *Why should it concern me?* Tell me, Megatron,” he said slowly, every word dripping venom, “are there many of them? Are they those who do the dirty work for you? I haven’t seen them in the city; where do you keep them?”

“Outside the city, obviously.” Megatron rested back on his chair and put the stylus aside. “You wouldn’t have seen them if you weren’t walking around at night; they fulfill their tasks when they can’t disturb anyone. They are offworlders, you guessed that right.”

“They are slaves, aren’t they?” This phrase Optimus spoke very, very quietly – but every word fell like a drop of lead. “That’s how your empire functions. You conquer and plunder and bring home thralls.” His voice rose again, and this time it rang with something terribly akin to betrayal. “You preach about breaking the chains of oppression, you call yourself a freedom fighter – yet you condone slavery!”

“I never promised freedom for all.” Megatron’s gaze was icy. “Freedom must be fought for; it must be taken. Those who can’t protect themselves deserve to lose it.”

“You’re a hypocrite!”

“No, I’m realistic.” Megatron sneered. “There can be no freedom and happiness for all; those who promise it are the real hypocrites. *I* am honest. The Autobots tried to put us on our knees, so we rose up and wrested our freedom from their hands. If the slaves want to be free, they must earn it; so far they proved inferior to our might.”

“So you dream your dreams of splendor and rest on the fruits of other people’s labor.” Optimus let out a derisive snort. “Truly you are noble warriors!”

Suddenly Megatron moved – too fast for his giant frame – and then he was leaning over his desk, red optics piercing Optimus’s very spark.

“When we rose against your Autobot regime,” he growled, “I swore that I will never see my people humiliated again, reduced to toiling away with dirty menial work. Never again will a Decepticon warrior do a servant’s job. So don’t come lecture me on nobility, Optimus Prime,” those dangerous fangs glinted in a smirk that was all but pleasant. “You Autobots warp the very essence of it.”

“So do you.” Optimus didn’t flinch, his back as straight as ever and his glare unwavering. “There is no such thing as a ‘servant’s job’, and if there is work worth despising, it’s the work of a soldier who robs and enslaves other people. You call yourself honest, but you’re the worst kind of liar, Megatron. You invented a noble cause to hide your atrocities behind. You don’t want justice; you just want to do to everybody else what had been done to you.”

Megatron seemed to collect himself as well.

“You might not be mistaken here,” he said, stepping back and crossing his arms. “But you *are* mistaken if you believe there is some sort of higher universal justice; that is the vilest lie I’ve ever heard.” He returned to his seat, his optics still trained on Optimus, but regaining their usual calm. “There is no justice, Optimus Prime, but the one you make yourself.”

Chapter End Notes

If you thought the Decepticons are nice, they're really not.

The "you just want to do to everybody else what had been done to you" phrase is a quote from the RID comics. I love that line.

Part III, Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hello everyone!

Sorry for skipping a week again. I was swimming in a sea of paperwork, but for now I can take a little break - which, in fact, is just a quiet before a new bureaucratic storm. But things are moving forward, which makes me happy, and I found some time to work on the story.

Thank you all for reading, leaving wonderful comments and waiting! You people are great.

“Here is the geography section,” Optimus said, putting another pile of hard drives near the shelves he cleared for them. “Now we need to sort these data discs and then put them in an alphabetical order.”

“Pff! It’s too complicated,” Scratch retorted, but made no attempt to stop Optimus. Even his remark came out half-hearted, like an obligatory phrase that proved his distaste for an Autobot on his territory. In fact, Scratch allowed Optimus to roam the archive freely and organize it in any way he wanted; sometimes the Decepticon followed him around, but avoided active participation. He didn’t want to work and, apparently, only stuck around for company.

Optimus didn’t pay him much attention, except for the normal caution. Instead, he concentrated on bringing order to the mess that the library became due to Scratch’s negligence. It gave him something to busy his mind with, and also gave a reason to stay away from the command center. Optimus didn’t want to see Megatron anytime soon.

He tightened his plating instinctively, disgust still crawling under the panels like ghosts of touches. Somehow he forgave Megatron for the Great War – enough to start enjoying his affections – but he couldn’t forgive what he’d learned about the society Megatron built here. It had shaken him out of his little world, and now Optimus could see clearly again. He needed to get out; he needed to stop Megatron once and for all – not only for the Autobots’ sake, but for the sake of the peoples of the galaxy, including the Decepticons themselves.

“Hey, Scratch,” he asked the day before, “what do you think of the slaves you keep here?”

The librarian tilted his head.

“What do I think..? Um, nothing?” He shrugged. “Glad they’re here. Wish one of them would take over my job, under condition that I get transferred to a better post. I mean, who even goes to a public library? Everybody has their own archives at home! I’d love to do something safe, like, I dunno, communications? Even monitor duty! Monitor duty would be nice...”

Optimus shook his head, not in the mood to listen to the archivist’s blabbering.

“No, I mean – do you think it’s fair? You Decepticons won your freedom, but now you took the roles of slavers, forcing innocents to work for you in mines and industry...”

“Better than me!” Scratch exclaimed, and his short wings wiggled. “I don’t wanna go back to forging reinforcing bars, that job’s even worse than my current one. It’s an Autobot work,” he added, perking his chin up. “Decepticons don’t do that.”

Apparently, Megatron’s propaganda ran deep. Or maybe he was just voicing his people’s general ideas.

Optimus decided to let it slip; he needed Scratch to stay at least remotely friendly. Unbeknownst to him, the grumpy librarian provided Optimus with an uncontrolled access to a treasure vault of information. The Prime has already found detailed maps of New Kaon and some construction blueprints from the early days of the colony. He just needed to find the missing pieces, and then he’d have a plan of the city’s communications, including old forgotten ones. After that getting into the science labs wouldn’t be an impossible mission anymore.

At times Optimus felt a twinge of guilt for taking advantage of Scratch like that, but Optimus stomped on that guilt before it could bloom. After all, he was on New Kaon, among Decepticons, and if Optimus wanted to outsmart his hosts, he’d have to act like a Decepticon.

He also learned more about the creatures the warbuilds used for slaves. According to Scratch’s explanations, there were actually several alien races present – all of them mechanoids, some indigenous to the planets the Decepticons conquered, some brought here from raids to unaligned systems.

“It’s safer to keep various races together,” Scratch told him, lounging on an old worn-out chair and chewing energon sticks. “Less chances of them uniting and rioting. The Macronians have a long-lasting feud with Karnians, and Pyrovars were slaggin’ savages when we came here and colonized their planet, so other slaves look down at them. There are also Thrulls, but they’re the most docile of all: their planet doesn’t exist anymore, so it’s not that they have anywhere to go, heh.”

“You speak very lightly of such things,” Optimus said quietly, literally forcing himself to remain civil. He needed Scratch; he couldn’t afford arguing with him.

“Aw come on, they’re well-fed, they have their homes and families, they get treated when they’re sick – what else can they want?” Scratch made a wide gesture with his energon stick. “New Kaon is fine, and Chaar too. I don’t envy those poor fraggers who got to work in Straxus’s domain, but even us warbuilds get a hard time there.”

“Are there any organics?”

“Ew, no!” Scratch cringed. “They’re too capricious: they need special atmosphere, special food, they can’t work when they care for offspring... No thanks, too many troubles with them.”

Optimus had to rely on Scratch’s words; after their quarrel Megatron put a firm restriction on leaving the city and walking around in the night. The warlord wanted to prevent potential uprisings instigated by Optimus, so he made sure Optimus couldn’t see or speak to any slaves. Optimus had a fair suspicion that Megatron hoped Optimus would forget about them at all, but he wasn’t going to give Megatron this pleasure. The warlord was a fool if he really believed in that. Optimus didn’t know how he was going to help those aliens yet, but he knew he had to. Nobody else would.

So while he was at it, he could also find a way to get out of the city and visit those industrial and mining facilities which the slaves operated. And if Optimus managed to get his hands on the plasma dynamic thruster, he would be able to get the slaves out of here. Or, if the Decepticons build their own space bridge first, they could use it. Possibilities were numerous, and Optimus simply needed to wait for the closest opportunity and then improvise on the go – something he did

best.

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud crash and a cacophony of voices coming from the main hall. Optimus looked around, searching for Scratch, but the librarian didn't hurry to his official working place; truth to be told, he was nowhere to be seen.

The crash repeated, and now Optimus could make out the words a gruff voice was shouting:

"Scratch! Come out, you lousy excuse for a doormat!"

"You have custome-e-ers!" another, higher voice singsonged.

Optimus scowled. He recognized them – they were just as loud back on Cybertron, when their owners pretended to be stunt performers. And, just like back on Cybertron, they brought nothing but trouble.

It was becoming apparent that Scratch wasn't going to face the Stunticons, leaving Optimus to care for the library. Oh well. Optimus shouldn't have counted on him anyway; after all, Scratch did call himself a coward. The Prime cursed under his breath and headed to door.

"One ought to keep quiet in a library," he said, entering the main hall. He was greeted by the sight of the Stunticons occupying the reception desk; the sole femme among them (Drag Strip, if Optimus remembered correctly) lounged *on* it. The entire scene was dominated by the hulking black and purple form of Motormaster, who was leaning on the counter. With a nauseating flip of his insides Optimus noticed that the Stunticons replaced their Autobot bodies they used for disguise with real Decepticon ones, and now Motormaster was much, much bigger than the last time they met.

His wide grin didn't make Optimus feel better.

"My, my, what have we here?" Motormaster cackled. "If it isn't Optimus Prime, the hero of Cybertron! Doing a lowly librarian's job, no less! The right place for an Autobot hero."

The implication was doubtlessly meant to be insulting, even though Optimus didn't see anything degrading about a librarian's job.

"If you want a book to read, you are welcome to make your order." Optimus put his hands akimbo, trying to gather up his bravery (although, considering the fact that he was alone against six 'cons, it was more of a madness rather than bravery). "Otherwise, I'm afraid, you'll have to leave."

"Read? Toxitron no read! Toxitron am slag Autobot!"

Optimus jolted, side-eyeing the neon yellow Stunticon. For some reason Toxitron didn't change bodies, so he still looked like a demented copy of Optimus himself, which, to be honest, freaked the Prime out. At first – back when he thought these 'cons to be performers – he guessed it to be a nasty joke, a revenge from Sentinel for his damaged ego – but even then the drooling and leaking acidic yellow bot made Optimus tighten his plating instinctively. Now, however, it became even more disturbing.

"Shut up, Toxitron!" Motormaster shoved the bot aside with a disgusted twitch of his mouth. "But the glitch is right; we are not here to read. We're... visiting our friend Scratchy. Although he seems to be ignoring his pals, which leaves us... with you." Motormaster's red optics fixed on Optimus, and the Prime shivered.

Drag Strip jumped off the counter, and the other Stunticons began closing on him, surrounding him

in a semi-circle. The open door to the archive was right behind Optimus's back, and his leg moved, making an automatic step towards it...

Motormaster smirked.

"Yes, Optimus Prime," he purred, "run, run and try to hide. It would make a great sport to hunt you between the shelves. We owe you a debt, you know, for putting us into Trypticon."

Optimus froze. No. He couldn't run; wouldn't forgive himself if he ran! If there was anything he truly hated, it was bullies who believed themselves to be unchallenged.

"My, my, what a great revenge it'd make," he snapped, putting all his sarcasm into this phrase. "Six mechs against me alone! Are you so afraid of me, Motormaster? Afraid to meet me one-on-one? I can't blame you, though." He laughed, straightening his back. "No wonder you're not sure you'll be able to defeat a mech who bested Megatron in single combat."

Perhaps it was too simple – but sometimes the simplest solutions were the most effective. Motormaster was a brute, and he couldn't tolerate such a blunt jab.

"Motormaster is afraid of nothing!" He proclaimed. "I will crush you with one finger, puny little *scraplet*!"

"'Puny little' is a tautology," Optimus replied. "You'd know that if you went to the library to actually read."

Motormaster bellowed. Yes, Optimus thought; get angry. Succumb to your rage. And then I'll be able to figure out something.

"Me slag Autobot!" Toxitron shrieked, charging, and became the victim of Motormaster's first blow.

"No! I deal with him! You all – back off!" The other Stunticons dispersed as Toxitron's body flew past them and crashed into the wall. Optimus used the commotion to dash from behind the counter to the middle of the hall. Here he had more space for maneuvering, and it immediately proved necessary when Motormaster charged at him like a bulldozer.

The fight began not exactly like a fight: it was more about Optimus running around, dodging Motormaster's giant hands that tried to grab him. Optimus might've boasted that he bested Megatron, but he had his jetpack and the mighty Magnus Hammer during that battle; right now he was unarmed, grounded and painfully aware that he had to finish this duel soon, before Motormaster decided to screw the rules and call for his team.

For now, luckily, he was merely shouting.

"Coward!" Another failed hit to Optimus's head. "I offered you a chance to run!" A kick Optimus barely evaded. "That's how all the Autobots fight!" Motormaster's arm plating opened, and a cannon's barrel aimed at Optimus's... Oh frag!

The laser shot heated the air right over the Prime's antenna, and he understood that he needed to do something quickly, before Motormaster burned the entire building to the ground. Running from laser fire was much harder, and Optimus's armor couldn't protect him forever.

He had to use the only semblance of a weapon he had – and he was going to get only one chance, since after that Motormaster would be waiting for his moves. Optimus could only pray that Motormaster could be knocked out fast.

He did use his chance well: luring Motormaster closer to the consoles, evaluating the distance – and then diving to the floor and shooting the grappling hook to tie the Decepticon's legs together. The Stunticon leader's heavy frame fell with a ground-shattering crash – and his helm smashed the console. It sizzled and sparked, delicate circuitry overloaded, and Motormaster screamed as the yellow and blue bolts of energy crackled over his head.

Optimus didn't lose a second: he ran up the fallen Decepticon's frame, activating his fire extinguisher. Foamy water spurted into Motormaster's face, serving as a conductor – and with a roar that ended in an undignified yelp he lost consciousness.

Optimus won.

It was unclear who spread the news – Optimus thought the Stunticons unlikely to share the details of their leader's humiliation – but then again, maybe they didn't really like Motormaster. In any case, in the evening of the same day the entire New Kaon knew the story of the library duel.

What Optimus didn't expect was the reaction. He thought he'd be punished somehow for attacking a Decepticon – but all warbuilds whom he met in the streets or the passages of the command center followed him with curious optics and generally acted... friendlier? A couple of 'cons even nodded and winked at him with approval, and Lugnut, whom he met at the stairs to the headquarters, patted him on the back (Optimus barely kept his balance when the giant claw smashed into his armor), proudly declaring him "worthy of glorious Lord Megatron's attention".

The 'cons were a weird folk.

But the greatest surprise waited for him in the passageway leading to his apartment. A huge magenta and gold figure was blocking the way, leaning on the wall.

"Optimus Prime." Under Strika's scrutinizing gaze Optimus felt transparent. "Let us have a word."

He had no choice but to comply.

Strika took him two floors lower, stopping before a very plain looking door, and typed the code on the control panel. The door slid open silently, and Optimus found himself in a spacious, but comfortable office. There was a desk, several monitors, an old, cracked and cozy chair... Everything was very utilitarian and unelaborate, yet this office somehow left a warmer impression than Megatron's luxurious apartment.

Strika strode right to the chair behind the desk and lowered her massive body into it; the old piece of furniture creaked under her weight. Then the femme put her hands on the table and focused on Optimus, her gaze unblinking.

The Prime cleared his throat, unsure of what to expect. Strika remained a mystery to him; usually she either sneered at him or ignored his presence completely, and Optimus had no idea where he stood with her. She was an enemy, like all cons, but was she an active one? Or a passive background source of contempt, like Shockwave? It didn't help that Optimus had a hard time trying to read her crude, expressionless semblance of a face.

To an Autobot eye Strika was hideous, but sometimes Optimus wondered whether the Decepticons had different ideals. Autobot femmes were significantly smaller and lithier than mechs; a femme was supposed to be slender and fragile, and during peacetime many femmes strived to wear lighter armor, visiting the beauty workshops to thin the plating or outright remove some bulkier parts. A

femme in the Autobot army was an exception rather than the rule. Decepticon femmes, on the contrast, didn't look very different from mechs, so much that Optimus had trouble telling them apart at first. Their frames were just as tall and just as heavily armed, only a little curvier. Strika, however, must've been far from pretty even by Decepticon standards.

But she was one of the most powerful Decepticons ever, both physically and politically. Countless battles were led by Megatron's fearsome General of Destruction, and millions of years of experience were peering at him from her contemplative optics. It was... quite a lot to bear.

"Optimus Prime," she uttered finally, her voice coming from a speaker that served as a mouth for her. "We need to talk."

"Um... Alright?" Optimus attempted to sound composed. "What about?"

"It has come to my attention that you are... displeased with our use of slave labor."

Oh... Okay. Optimus thought he was going to be punished for fighting with Motormaster – but, frankly speaking, now Optimus would prefer to be punished, because this topic didn't promise any pleasant things for him.

Nevertheless, he wasn't going to go back on his words.

"Yes," he confirmed, raising his chin and meeting Strika's stare. "I am."

"Hmmm," Strika studied him for a half-klik more and then nodded. "Good."

It took another half-klik for Optimus to fully grasp what she had just said.

"What?" He didn't even bother with feigning indifference now. "What do you mean 'good'?"

"I mean that it's about time somebody put this into Megatron's thick processor." Strika picked up several datapads and began arranging them into a neat pile. "I've been trying to reason with him for ages, but the stubborn glitch doesn't listen to me." Despite the harsh words, it came out in a rather fond manner, which only confused Optimus more. "Maybe he will listen to you."

"I... Wait-wait-wait. Wait." Optimus lifted his palms. "Please correct me if I got it wrong. You actually *want* to free the slaves? And you believe I could be of assistance? Why?" It was too good to be true. Too strange to be true!

Strika's optics narrowed.

"Slaves don't work well. I do my best to make my domain, Chaar, run with at least some efficiency, but the situation on our other worlds is disastrous. The slaves hate us, they have no real reason to give their everything or learn, they make mistakes and sabotage the production. We built a great fleet once, and what do we have now? A bunch of Thanatos-class ships that look like a bad joke when compared to our warships of the past, and our shortage of resources is only a partial cause for this. Back then our own soldiers worked at the factories and shipyards, they were enthusiastic about adding their contribution to the war effort; they knew they were fighting in this way too, building their own brighter future. Megatron gave them the freedom he promised, but he also taught them to reject the work we desperately need – all out of some misguided pride."

Optimus squirmed, once more pushing his ire back. Strika's strictly pragmatic arguments had nothing to do with the immorality of slavery as a whole, but Optimus guessed he couldn't be picky about potential allies. It was a miracle he found one in Megatron's prized General, and he wasn't going to miss the opportunity.

“So... You want us to work together against Megatron?” He suggested, choosing his words carefully. He didn’t want to imply too much – what if Shockwave was listening? – but it seemed that Starscream wasn’t the only one planning a coup d’etat...

“No.” Strika growled, and her optics flashed crimson, making Optimus flinch. “Don’t *ever* propose anything like that. Megatron is the supreme leader of all Decepticons, and shall always be. All I want is to have a functional economy instead of that crippled wreck we have now. I want to live in a real house, not in those temporary barracks we don’t replace out of dumb obstinacy, to have a real fleet that would be a force to reckon with. Megatron is a great leader, but he’s too concerned with past and future to take care of today.” She shook her head, palming the datapads idly. “I want to go back to Cybertron as much as everybody else, but in order to get there we must stay strong and prosperous – which we are not. Getting rid of the slaves would be the first step.”

“And you believe I can help you.” Optimus put his hands on his hips. “Help you make my enemies strong and prosperous.”

“Oh, but that would mean freeing your precious aliens, wouldn’t it?” If Strika had lips, she would be smirking right now. “Don’t be mistaken, Autobot. I have no liking for you and I believe you shouldn’t be here in the first place. But for some reason Megatron became fond of you, and I would be a bad general if I didn’t jump at the chance. My lord is demonstratively dismissing your suggestions and pretends to be indifferent, so it’s fair to suppose that he *is* affected by them. Perhaps we need another approach; he doesn’t listen to my reports of statistics and economics,” she threw the datapads on the table in barely repressed frustration, “but maybe he’ll listen to your lectures about morals.”

“Why?” Optimus grew bold enough to walk to Strika’s desk and put his hands on the tabletop. “Why are you so sure I could influence Megatron? He’s terribly obstinate, you said it yourself.”

“Because I can relate very well to the situation he’s in now.” The expression of Strika’s optics softened. “I’m much older than him, and I spent much more time in the Kaonic arena. I remember well what it feels like, to be stuck in a dark place, convinced that the only thing you can do is continue fighting, until this narrow way into bleak tomorrow is the only path you are able to see, until your stubborn refusal to give up becomes your only support. And I also remember meeting a bright young mech, whom I thought to be idealistic and naïve, but who ignited something in me – a hope that there could be change, that this path was not inescapable. Who made me see the world with new optics.”

Her gaze shifted to the holographic picture standing at her desk. Optimus leaned down, and Strika turned it to him.

It was an old, old hologram, its projector dented and scuffed from age, and the picture itself wasn’t of great quality. It was taken over somebody’s head, and there was confetti falling from the sky, but the unknown photographer captured the moment very well. Optimus spotted Strika instantly – she didn’t look much different, only her plating was stained with grease and energon and painted with swirly red lines – a gladiator’s war paint. To her right an unfamiliar Decepticon was holding a prize cup. A third mech was perched on Strika’s shoulder – she was holding him up with one mighty arm; he was raising a sword in triumph, radiant smile playing on his lips, and, to his surprise, Optimus recognized Megatron in this joyful young Decepticon. His armor was less thick than now, though, and painted with the same red color, albeit in different patterns. He... didn’t resemble that weary and cynical warlord Optimus knew at all.

“That was the first time we won the championship as a team,” Strika murmured beside him. Optimus cast a sidelong glance at her; the femme’s optics were dim and half-shut, but not in a

frown. “That guy with the cup, Swiftwing, he died in the next season, and that was when Megatron found Lugnut. But that victory – it was the first time I participated in team battles. He persuaded me... The silver-tongued bastard.” She ran her thick fingers over the projector unconsciously, her field rippling with warmth, and Optimus sensed his own field pulse in return.

“You are truly loyal to him, aren’t you?” he asked quietly.

Strika met his optics.

“I’d die for him,” she said simply.

“Why? I mean, don’t misunderstand me,” Optimus added hastily, “I don’t doubt your faithfulness. But you Decepticons don’t seem like a very... selfless bunch.”

Strika laughed.

“Yeah, we aren’t. As for me and Megatron...” She stared at the hologram again. “When he first appeared in the arena with his big orations and righteous fury, I couldn’t stand him. I thought him overconfident, foolish and shallow. His speeches left me bitter and angry; who was this youngster who thought he could spill promises and rallying cries, when many older and wiser bots failed before him? ‘Those are pretty words you’re saying’, I told him. ‘But they are just that: words. Nothing will ever come out of them.’ And then... he proved me wrong.”

There was a smile hidden in her voice – a smile she had no other means to show. For a brief moment Optimus wondered just how Strika got to the gladiatorial arena; what was her story? He doubted it was something as simple as killing the guard.

“We considered bonding once, you know,” she said, startling Optimus out of his musings. “But we decided that it would interfere with our relationship as commander and subordinate. Then Lugnut and I happened, and, well... Megatron bonded to his cause.” She looked at Optimus again. “It’s nice to see him caring for something other than his quest for Cybertron. I would’ve definitely preferred him to choose a loyal Decepticon instead of an Autobot, but what’s done is done. Better you than some traitor trash like Blackarachnia.”

Optimus opened his mouth to question putting the topics of bonding and his relationship with Megatron in the same paragraph, but Strika’s last remark distracted him.

“Wait, why am I better than Blackarachnia? She did join the Decepticons!”

“Exactly.” Strika’s engine rumbled. “A person who betrayed once will betray again. At least you know the value of loyalty.”

There was some logic in this, but it still sounded backwards. As did Strika’s offer in general.

“So you care about Megatron’s well-being, yet you see nothing wrong with using his affections against him.” The corners of Optimus’s mouth twitched. “That... isn’t quite right.”

“I’m not using it against him, I’m trying to further his own goals. And you, little Autobot, can get something you want in the process. If I see you actually attempting to use your influence against my lord, I’m fully prepared to face the consequences of offlining you.”

Optimus gulped; such a casual threat had more effect than any of Starscream’s boastful declarations.

“Got it,” he muttered. “Um, anything else you wanted?”

“No.” Strika waved her hand. “You may go. If you require my aid, contact Lugnut. No need to attract unnecessary attention by talking to each other.”

“Alright.” Optimus lingered before the doorway. “I, um... Thought you were going to punish me for fighting Motormaster,” he confessed.

Strika only snorted.

“Punish? Please! The glitch-head brought it upon himself. If he can’t defeat a tiny unarmed Autobot, he deserves to be the laughingstock of entire New Kaon. Good thinking, by the way.” Strika nodded at him with matronly approval.

Optimus could do nothing but mutter a “thank you” and leave Strika’s office.

The ‘cons were a really, really weird folk.

Part III, Chapter 5

Sentinel hated this trip. He hated every single second of it. Perched on top of Safeguard, clinging to his wings as the mini-combiner flew through space; dependent on the mercy of two Autobot-Decepticon hybrids and a Decepticon knock-off clone; feeling as helpless and useless as it was physically possible... It was so not Magnus-like. But at least he was alive and they were heading to one of the Autobot space bridges – on their own, since they couldn't send out a signal out of fear that it would be intercepted by Quintessons. Although Sentinel's tanks churned when he thought of other Autobots seeing him like this. He had enough lopsided grins coming from that insolent female Starscream clone.

Fortunately, she was flying in her altmode, which spared Sentinel the view of her nasty face. Who did she think she was, mocking him like this? Making him mumble apologies to the twins like a scolded sparkling? He was their superior! They were escaped convicts and criminals! Sentinel's cheeks burned at the memory of that shame: him, stuttering and mumbling that he was sorry under the twins' suspicious glares and the femme's red gaze drilling into his back. But it did give him what he needed: a ride home. And Sentinel Magnus was ready to make sacrifices for his people.

He muttered curses under his breath when he was dropped on the rocky surface of an asteroid. Safeguard separated into his parts then, and the twins transformed to the root modes, landing on their feet softly.

"Why did we stop?" Sentinel stood up, flexing his fingers that were stiff after several solar cycles of clutching. "We need to get to the Opulus space bridge without delay!"

"Going on for long with no recharge is bad for your systems, including battle protocols." Slipstream landed to his side and strolled towards them. "Regular defrag is required for your processor's top performance. Don't they teach that in the Autobot Academy?"

"They do!" Sentinel hissed at her. "But this is an emergency! My soldiers need a leader!"

"If you're the best they've got, they're in deep shit," she smirked, settling down on the nearest rock.

"Like a lousy knock-off like you would know what makes a good leader! You're one of Megatron's cronies!"

Slipstream shrugged.

"In that, what, one hour that I knew him he seemed like a fine guy. But I'm not anybody's crony." Sharp fangs flashed between dark-colored lips. "I serve nobody but myself."

"Yeah, Sentinel Magnus, sir," Jetstorm added, if a bit unsurely. "Slipstream is okay. She's not with those Decepticons."

"We thought she is when we met her on Earth," Jetfire joined his brother. "But we end up talking, and she was really cool. She showed us around the planet and how to get fuel, and we fly together."

Both twins were fidgeting, eyeing Sentinel with wary optics. Their every gesture and intonation was painfully familiar, reminding him of those eager Elite Guard soldiers he knew, but something was off about them. Some new tension, some new attitude. Sentinel couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it brought back memories of Optimus and Elita. His dear Elita, warped beyond recognition

into a monstrous freak; Optimus, once humble and dedicated, turning into a treacherous glory-hoarder. And now Jetfire and Jetstorm... More than anything Sentinel wanted just to tell them what he thought and make a stand, but it wasn't the right time for heroics. He needed to live; he needed to get to Cybertron. He was a Magnus now, and he had a duty to his people.

"Whatever," he mumbled, flopping on the ground. "Go to recharge, if that's what you must do. We can't lose time."

"My, my! I wonder if you're actually capable of saying 'thank you' or something." Slipstream took four metal containers out of her subspace and threw three of them to the twins and Sentinel. He caught it and stared at the thing suspiciously; some liquid was sloshing inside, but Sentinel had no idea what it was. There was a crack, and he lifted his head right in time to see Slipstream take her claw out of the hole she made in the can and begin drinking. The twins followed her example, although their lack of claws made the action much less precise.

Sentinel's own attempt was even clumsier, and the first tentative sip made him cough.

"Eugh! What is this?!"

"Earth's jet fuel." Slipstream licked her soiled claw. "You get used to the taste."

"Organic fuel?! Made from organic tissue?!" Sentinel dropped the can in horror, watching the transparent liquid flow out in globules due to low gravity. "I'm not drinking it!"

Slipstream was upon him in a glimpse, the dropped can in her hand and her knee pinning Sentinel's throat to the ground.

"Do not waste the fuel we carried all the way from Earth," she hissed, red optics narrowed. "I'm doing my friends a favor by helping you, and don't think for a moment that I'm here to fucking *coddle* you! Now be a good boy and drink it, or I'll pour it into your auxiliary fuel line!"

"Jet...fire! Jetstorm! Get her... off!" Sentinel managed to grind out, struggling and failing to push the taller and heavier femme away. The twins exchanged uncertain glances, but kept standing there.

"What are you... waiting for! I'm your... superior officer!" Slipstream's knee was starting to press into his throat cables, blocking the flow of energon.

"But we helped you earlier," Jetfire said, hands clasped tight around the fuel can. "And you call us Decepticon scum. Say we no deserve to wear Autobot badges." Jetstorm simply nodded, his visor flickering with hurt.

"Okay... Okay! I'm sorry! I said I'm-gah! Sorry! Just stop it!" Sentinel's head was beginning to spin, and the femme's knee was too close to his voicebox.

"Now we're talking," Slipstream leaned closer. "Will you drink the fuel?"

"Ghh-yes! Yes!"

"And say 'thank you' afterwards?" Now the slagging femme was *teasing*!

"Yes!" Sentinel rasped, hating himself.

"Very well."

And then the pressure was gone, and Sentinel was lying on his back, his vents shrieking, as Slipstream walked away with her wings perked proudly. The can of fuel was left next to him.

The twins finished their meal in the matter of klicks, and just as fast they curled around each other and fell into recharge. Sentinel had much harder time with his own fuel; every gulp cost him dearly, his insides twisting at the mere thought of *what* this liquid was made of and by whom. Yet he proceeded to force it down; it was a logical thing to do – he was low on energon – and he definitely didn't need another lesson in humility from the clone.

Who was watching him with the same infuriating smirk on her lips.

“What?!” Sentinel snapped.

That disgusting grin widened.

“Nothing. Just observing a pure-bred asshole in his natural habitat.”

“Go frag yourself,” Sentinel grumbled. “And what even is an ‘asshole’? Did you get infested with organic *words* as well?”

“I spent all my life on Earth.” Slipstream shrugged. “I have Starscream’s knowledge, but I prefer to keep his memories archived. I’m my own thing, and I don’t wanna know all the nasty details of his life, although some of them are funny. He used to sing in the shower, did you know that? Horrible, horrible ear torture.”

The image was too vivid for his liking, and Sentinel spent a long klik mesmerized by it, until he finally shook his head, dispersing it.

“So you’re not only an inferior clone, but one who rejects her Cybertronian nature too.” He cringed. “Outrageous.”

“Do you have something against clones?” Slipstream bared her fangs. “I wouldn’t be so judgmental of others if I had a chin like this. It’s no moon, it’s Magnus’s chin!” She giggled, like she’d just made a joke.

“*Enough* with the chin already!” The can’s metal bent under Sentinel’s fingers. “Why are you helping me if you don’t even consider yourself Cybertronian?!”

“I don’t care about Cybertron or you, here you are right,” Slipstream agreed. “But these two little disasters do, although I will never understand what they see in you.” She cast a glance at the snoring twins, and for a moment her smirk turned into a real smile. “I was curious why the two new Autobots on Earth seemed to hide from the Autobot that was stationed there. Our first meeting turned into a fight, but when we figured out that we all were on our own, well...” She shrugged. “I like the kids. They’re feisty, resemble my brothers a lot. Which means they doubtlessly need somebody to watch over them.”

“Certainly not you!” Sentinel sneered. “Mingling with a filthy Decepticon knock-off won’t do them any good.”

“Don’t make me come over there and strangle you again.” Slipstream inspected her (long and very sharp) claws. “And why do you care? Frankly speaking, I’m surprised you care about Cybertron at all.”

To Sentinel’s own shock, he actually was offended by that.

“Why won’t I? Cybertron is my home, and I’m responsible for the Autobots that live there.”

“You don’t act like you care for anyone,” Slipstream said, and suddenly Sentinel felt uncomfortable under her scrutiny. It wasn’t... often that he heard people speak to him with such blunt sincerity. Not since Elita.

He squirmed and chose to busy himself with downing the rest of the liquid.

The silence that followed was kind of hard to bear. The bitter taste of the Earth fuel stuck to his glossa like the bile from rage and humiliation Sentinel accumulated during the last days... months even. The twins, Optimus, the terrible unexpected war he was losing, the defeat at Velocitron, and now this Decepticon wench insulting him! Sentinel wanted to lash out at her, to show her that he was unbent, unbowed – but he was tired. So tired of the endless challenges that somehow ended up blowing into his face.

“Are you done? It’s time for thanking me.”

“What?” Sentinel’s awakening from his dreary pondering was fast and brutal.

“You promised to express your thanks properly.” Slipstream was lounging on her rock, grinning.

“I..!” Sentinel wanted to seethe, to express just how disgraceful he found that suggestion, but Slipstream’s grin turned dangerous.

“Do you prefer me to beat that gratitude out of you? I heard of some bots who enjoy such things,” she purred, running the tip of her glossa up the elegant claw.

Sentinel’s face heated up.

“Shut up! How dare you... even assume..!” He balled his fists as the sudden rush streamed through his fuel lines, spark pounding hard. Finally, he managed to get ahold of himself; it was through gritted dental plates that he uttered: “Fine. Thank you.”

“I didn’t quite catch that.” Slipstream propped herself on her hands. “Louder. Make it clear what you are grateful for.”

That wench..! He was going to murder her! Chain her up and throw her in Trypticon – wait, Trypticon was gone – to the Quintessons! Make her pay for humiliating the Magnus of Cybertron, the...

“Thank you,” he growled, face hot with shame, “for saving me and letting me refuel.”

“That’s a good boy.” Slipstream hummed a short tune. “Wasn’t that hard, was it? Now go to recharge, Magnus. I’ll stay on guard.”

She was enjoying it, that glitched virus-ridden shareware! Oh, Sentinel would have his revenge one day. He would make her regret every single thing she did to him!

Those promises helped to distract him from how fast his spark was racing.

What puzzled Optimus the most was that Megatron’s attitude towards him never changed despite their quarrel. The warlord – in those times when Optimus saw him – was just as civil with him, and he wasn’t even trying to get Optimus into his berth again. Which was good, because Optimus

honestly wasn't sure of the outcome if Megatron insisted on fragging him and Optimus refused. The all-time popular tales of evil Decepticons forcing themselves on Autobot prisoners were coming to mind.

The library became sort of an asylum for him. Optimus spent days researching the history of the Decepticon movement and exile with Scratch as his source of details and confirmation. After Optimus's victory over Motormaster the librarian was looking at Optimus like at some sort of hero, and was more than happy to offer commentary. And there was a lot to comment on; it was astonishing just how much information was omitted from the Autobot archives and history books. It was hard to believe that the two races lived on the same planet; even their myths varied! Take, for example, the story of the war with the Enemies Beyond the Sky – what most scholars believed to be a record of a space invasion; as Optimus learned from his earlier talk with Megatron, there was no mention of Prima (the great Autobot hero whose name the rank of Prime was derived from) and his mighty Star Saber. In his place the Decepticons put Megatronus, a warbuild who possessed the legendary Requiem Blaster.

But no matter how insightful his research had been, Optimus couldn't avoid Megatron forever if he wanted to do anything about the slaves.

There was one more thing that encouraged his hesitation. Despite all he learned, Optimus still couldn't bring himself to resent Megatron. He resented his actions and decisions, yes, but somehow it wasn't enough to stop Optimus's foolish spark from fluttering when Megatron's deep voice reached his audials. He tried to convince himself that the days of careless revelry were gone, that Optimus had got a decent callback to reality, that his illicit affair ended for good. It had to end sooner or later. There was no way for a loyal Autobot and the Decepticon leader to have anything in common. This was never supposed to be anything more than simple frags.

But as New Kaon's long nights passed, all spent in solitude of Optimus's quarters, he began feeling lonelier and lonelier. Sure, there was Scratch to keep him company, and he could probably talk to Lugnut or Strika or try to find more acquaintances around, but all of this wasn't enough. To Optimus's horror, he realized that he missed being held and praised and adored, missed the affection, missed the freedom of not being weighed down by responsibility.

He tried telling himself that it was just loneliness speaking; that he'd take any affection in this condition, Megatron's or not. That he missed his friends too, so surely if he went back to them he'd be cured!

He was pathetic. Tamed and trained to run to the Decepticon lord at the slightest show of interest, all to have his head petted (figuratively speaking). What a fine Autobot soldier he was! Definitely worth the rank of a Prime!

He couldn't let his stupid emotional turmoil to become an obstacle to his quest.

However, when they finally came face to face with each other, it happened by accident: Optimus was late from his day at the library, and Megatron, apparently, was returning from a meeting.

"Hello, Optimus Prime." Red optics focused on him, and Optimus's spark made a familiar leap. "Still keeping peace and order in the library?"

"Studying," Optimus corrected automatically. "And good evening to you too, Megatron." It sounded like a finishing blow to an unborn conversation, but Optimus lingered, trying to figure out how to continue. "I, um... May I talk to you?"

"Just talk?" Megatron chuckled at the embarrassed flare of Optimus's EM field. "Alright, alright.

Sure, we can talk. Care to join me for some oil?”

“Yeah,” Optimus mumbled. Oil definitely seemed alluring.

And that was how he found himself on the same too-high chair he occupied in the first night in Megatron’s quarters, with a goblet of oil in hand and the warlord contemplating him over the rim of his own chalice.

It was Megatron who started speaking.

“I take it you’re still upset?”

Optimus nearly sputtered the oil he had just sipped.

“Upset? You think I’m merely temporarily ‘upset’?” He glared at the warlord in disbelief.

“Megatron, I learned that you condone slavery! ‘Upset’ doesn’t even begin to cover it!” He put the goblet aside, the familiar wave of nausea coming up to his throat. “How can you even treat it so lightly?!”

“I also led a war against your people for millions of years and killed numerous Autobots. That didn’t seem to bother you much. What’s so different about this?”

“What’s..? Oh, sweet Allspark...” Optimus rubbed his forehead. He felt like he was talking to a sparkling. A very dangerous sparkling who had thousands of lives in his grasp. “Look, there is a difference. Your past actions... There was a war. I don’t mean that I approve of what you’ve done – and I’ve read enough Autobot *and* Decepticon records to know what you’ve done – but that was war. Decepticons are not the only ones capable of cruelty and murder; the Golden Age is proof enough, and the Autobot Ministry of Science did some horrible projects... I get it. But there are things in this world that must never, *never* be treated as normal.”

“We’re still at war.” Megatron put his own goblet on the table too. “I do what I can for the good of my people.”

“Lie.” Optimus met the Decepticon’s gaze head on. “You do what you can to stroke your own ego. I’ve read your histories, Megatron, I listened to your and the others’ stories of what the Golden Age was like to warbuilds, and I’m sorry. Our ancestors were guilty of forcing your people into what they called ‘rehabilitation’ but what was essentially slavery, and they paid a heavy price for their crimes. Your cause – what it was about in the beginning – was righteous. And I’m sorry that it turned into total war between our races; I don’t know how it could’ve been avoided, I don’t know *if* it could’ve been avoided, so I won’t judge anyone – neither you, nor the Autobot High Command. The cause you represented once... I could support.”

Optimus made a pause, lowering his optics and mulling over his possibilities in haze. Careful, Optimus; you’re playing with a great manipulator. If you’re not sincere, he’ll crack your game. But it doesn’t matter you can’t use what you know about your opponent...

“You said you wished I were a Decepticon,” Optimus said slowly. “You said you wanted me to walk around New Kaon and see the Decepticons, see what you are by myself and make my own conclusions. I did that, Megatron.” He locked optics with the warlord again. “I have seen *people*. Normal people, maybe different from my own in some ways, maybe more violent than what I’m used to, but not... inherently evil. They deserve a happy life like every other creature in the universe – a life with proper homes and decent jobs and a sense of dignity. But I have also seen them oppress other living beings and use them like tools. Is this what you wanted me to see too?”

Optimus stood up from his chair and made a step towards Megatron; their height difference was somewhat lessened this way, but Optimus still had to look up. Yet for some reason it didn't bother him right now.

"I can't get behind the cause that serves the idea of elevating one group above everybody else." He balled his fists but didn't raise them; an act of determination rather than aggression. "This is what you escaped once, and now you wish to take your tormentors' place? You want me to join the faction that – as you so graciously explained back on Quintessa – intend to wipe out my own kind. To enslave other nations. To use other planets as power sources without care or conscience. If you really thought that I would willingly join such a cause... You don't know me at all." Optimus closed his optics for a moment, and when he opened them, they were gentler – hesitant even.

"But that's not the case, isn't it?" He asked softly. "You're not stupid – I would never make a mistake of considering you such. You know me and my problems well, that much you have proven numerous times – and yes, I admit it. Then why, Megatron? There is no way you really believe that I'd defect to your side; so why keep me around? What do you *really* want of me?"

For one brief moment it appeared like he had Megatron cornered; those red optics darted to the side, only to return to Optimus's face, but that fleeting glimpse of uncertainty spoke volumes.

"Maybe I just like fragging you," he said at last, EM field rippling with contained threat.

Optimus bared his non-existent fangs in a gesture he adopted without noticing.

"Touch me and I'll fight you," he warned, every servo tense.

For a second he thought Megatron *would* attack him, but the warlord simply took a sip from his goblet – a reserved, well-controlled action.

"I don't need force to get a frag," he answered. "I have an army of loyal subjects who'd come to me willingly."

"Shouldn't I be in prison then?"

"Do you want to?" Megatron's optics were two red slits.

"To be honest, I'd like to visit Trypticon," Optimus said in a suddenly casual and cheerful tone. "I wanted to see how the Mini-Cons are doing. They're still there, aren't they?"

Megatron blinked, confused for the second time during this evening. Optimus could congratulate himself with a record.

"Yes, they are there. And yes, you can visit them, but under supervision."

It was Optimus's turn to blink dumbfoundedly.

"Really? Oh, okay then. I can ask Lugnut to accompany me..."

"No," Megatron was smiling again, and this smile promised trouble. "Not Lugnut."

Megatron's chosen supervisor was Shockwave.

Who, apparently, was as unenthusiastic about this task as Optimus, but was going to do his best for the glory of his beloved lord and master.

“Don’t even think of doing anything funny,” Shockwave hissed as he escorted Optimus up the stairs leading to the entrance. “I’m watching you, Autobot.”

Optimus chose not to answer.

Trypticon didn’t change much since the last time Optimus was there – but there were some changes nonetheless. Rows of cell blocks were being dismantled, some walls demolished, some erected anew, changing the look of Trypticon from prison to what it used to be before – a fortress. But there was no trace of the workers.

“Who’s doing the renovation?” Optimus cast a sidelong glance at his companion. “Are they on a break?” *Or are they slaves that you ushered out so that I don’t meet them*, he wanted to add, but restrained himself.

“The Mini-Cons are doing the repairs,” Shockwave replied. “They have their own schedule; we don’t interfere with their rules.”

There was a faint discomfort in his otherwise calm voice; apparently, not only Autobots were freaked out by the Mini-Cons.

Their walk came to an abrupt halt when after another turn their way was blocked by a small round orange frame.

“Sureshock!” Optimus didn’t even try to hide his relief; the empty passageways were beginning to get on his nerves. “Hello! It’s me, Optimus Prime! Do you remember me?”

The Mini-Con’s yellow optics blinked.

{Sureshock: remembers. Optimus Prime is welcome. Shockwave is welcome. State your purpose?}

“I’m just visiting, Sureshock.” Optimus squatted near the tiny bot and smiled. “I heard that you were still in Trypticon, so I wanted to check how you were doing. Are you okay? Do the Decepticons treat you well?” The Mini-Cons were incapable of lying, so direct questions were the best.

{Mini-Cons: in no danger. Decepticons treat well.} Sureshock beeped in what Optimus supposed was content. Or not. It was hard to tell with the Mini-Cons. {Mini-Cons take care of Trypticon.}

“Um, you... Are not forced into doing it, right? You can go out if you want?” Knowing their hosts, it wasn’t unwise to make sure.

{Mini-Cons take care of Trypticon,} Sureshock repeated. {No reason to go out.}

“O-kay...” Judging by Sureshock’s non-changed demeanor and Shockwave squirming, the former prison was indeed a zone that belonged to the Mini-Cons. “I’m glad you’re fine. Can I see the others?” Not that he didn’t trust Sureshock... But double-checking never hurt.

{Affirmative. Optimus Prime: follow.}

Without further comments the orange Mini-Con turned around and headed down the corridor with remarkable speed, making Optimus and Shockwave hurry. The Decepticon’s EM field emanated displeasure, but Optimus didn’t blame him: visiting the place where you were held prisoner couldn’t be a riveting experience.

Several minutes of walking later the passageway opened into a large hall that seemed to serve as a

central court once, and here at last Optimus saw the other Mini-Cons. They were scurrying around, carrying pieces of metal ten times their size, building and rebuilding the inner structure of the fortress to get rid of the dreary remnants of the prison.

An angry beep interrupted Optimus's gawking, and he looked down to see another familiar bot: the dark-colored form of Leader-1, the Mini-Con supervisor.

"Hello," Optimus smiled, if a bit strained; he was used to Sureshock, but Leader-1 somehow managed to have a strict and cold presence despite his equal lack of emotional expression.

{Greeting to Optimus Prime and Shockwave.} Narrow yellow visor fixed on him. {State your purpose.}

"I just wanted to make sure your people are alright." Optimus shrugged apologetically. "I was worried."

{Concern: unnecessary. Mini-Cons: in no danger.} Leader-1 paused, his vocalizer clicking. {Optimus Prime: prisoner?}

"Me? Um..." Optimus cast another glance at Shockwave, but the Decepticon kept arrogant silence. "No, I guess? Megatron calls me his guest."

Leader-1's visor glowed, and a scanner ray flashed out of it, running over Optimus's frame. Shockwave beside him twitched, but, once again, made no comments.

{Status confirmed and accepted.} There was a brief tingly feeling, and Leader-1 turned off his ray. {Optimus Prime is free to go.} Then he turned around promptly and left.

"Not a talkative fellow," Shockwave said at last. Optimus agreed with him inwardly, although he kind of came to expect such things from Mini-Cons.

It wasn't until when he got to his apartment and finally got rid of Shockwave that Optimus noticed a new little icon pulsing on his HUD. Curious, he opened that program and didn't quite understand what it was at first – he never installed that – only to freeze when he finally realized its source. There was the phantom of that tingly feeling again, and the recent exchange rang in his mind:

Megatron calls me his guest.

Status confirmed and accepted. Optimus Prime is free to go.

He was staring at the control program for the tracking device hidden in his body.

Part III, Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains some Strika/Megatron. Don't worry, Lugnut is aware of their frick-fracking and approves.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

No matter how giddy the unexpected gift from Leader-1 made Optimus feel, he had to pull himself together and seriously contemplate how he should use it.

He couldn't just switch the tracking device off: it would instantly catch Shockwave's attention, and all chances for freedom would be lost. After some time spent learning the program's capabilities Optimus found out that it could alter the tracking signal's perceived location: for example, Optimus could fix it on his room and go elsewhere without being noticed. However, this way also had its dangers: if somebody saw Optimus and word got to Shockwave that the Prime wasn't where the tracker showed him at the time, he'd be done for.

Which meant that Optimus had to be extra careful.

He came up with a plan soon enough. There were no cameras in Optimus's washracks (he double-checked it just to be sure), but there was a ventilation shaft. It made the washracks a perfect base of operations, although it did put a limit on how often and how long Optimus could relish his newfound freedom. This called for some preparations.

His abstinence from Megatron's berth served as a good cover-up. Optimus began spending more time in his washracks, coming out looking sated and exhausted. A couple of times he really brought himself to overload in there, "accidentally" missing some spots of lubricant during clean-up. One time he "forgot" to shut the door completely and even moaned Megatron's name (just to piss Shockwave off).

And all the while he kept gathering maps and old construction plans, unsupervised and making the best of Scratch's lenience.

Finally, when Optimus was more or less sure that his pretense was established and that he gathered sufficient information, he dared to venture into the maze of vents and old forgotten tunnels in and underneath the Decepticon city.

The passages were too small to fit a warbuild, but just the right size for Optimus to travel in his altmode. Once more he thanked the Allspark and the Autobot common sense for his compact and sturdy altmode that didn't have any protruding wings or rotaries. There was a thirty minute limit marked on his inner chronometer, so Optimus had to travel fast and investigate as much as he could.

It turned out to be a harder task than he predicted. Some of the tunnels present on maps were blocked or demolished; some led nowhere, and some were too narrow even for the small Autobot to squeeze into (which left him with a nasty suspicion regarding those who built these tunnels).

However, step by step, he did find a way to the research complex – and on the third try he was

rewarded with the sound of voices coming from what Optimus's map identified as "Laboratory A2". Cautious, he transformed to his root mode and crawled closer, as silent as possible, until the faint murmur broke into distinct words.

"...d kill for a can of oil right now."

"I can feel you, pal. My head hurts like Pit."

Thin rays of light were coming from the gaps in the ventilation cover, and as Optimus crept to it and peeked into the room, his gaze fell on some unknown equipment right below him, a corner of a shelf blocking some of the view, a couple of glowing screens and a back of some Decepticon. His companion seemed to stand out of Optimus's limited line of vision.

"I'd ask 'when will the overtime stop', but hey, we both know it: never," the invisible mech complained.

"It'll end when we give Megatron a functioning copy of the Autobot plasma dynamic thruster."

"Like I said: never. We've been fragging with that scrap for how long? And all our prototypes refuse to work."

The scientist Optimus could see sighed, his entire frame slumping.

"Megatron will have our heads if we don't succeed."

"Megatron had built a space bridge on that organic planet, hadn't he? Why can't he lend a hand?"

"I heard he had an Autobot space bridge engineer helping him."

"He has an Autobot now too. Why don't we use him?"

"Because he's a soldier, not an engineer."

"Pity, that. Why aren't we building a space bridge, anyway? That Autobot used to command a space bridge repair crew. He's bound to know *something*. Maybe he'll remember some specs if we melt his legs or drip molten lead on his spark casing..."

Optimus bit his lip at this suggestion, but forced himself to remain still. Knowing that the Decepticons failed at their attempts to reverse engineer transwarp technology was comforting. If only these two went away, so that he could jump down and snatch away the original plasma dynamic thruster...

"Did you put the thruster in the vault?"

"Of course, whom are you taking me for? I don't want Megatron *and* Shockwave to come after my aft."

Aw, dammit.

"Still, I don't get it. Won't our own space bridge be more practical? We'd be able to transwarp right to Cybertron's surface!"

"And be met by Autobot forces. They're guarding the space bridges extra well now, don't wanna teleport right where they're expecting us. I think old Megs's plan is sensible: a fleet of transwarp-capable ships would be more useful."

“What fleet? What ships?” The invisible scientist let out a short sarcastic laugh. “Have you, I dunno, seen them? Transwarp drives on Thanatos-class cruisers are a waste of resources, and our last great warship was rammed into that organic planet’s moon, courtesy of Starscream.”

“It’s not the ships, it’s who pilot them that matters. We are the mightiest warriors in the galaxy, and now that Megatron’s with us and not chasing the Allspark, he’ll lead us to the final assault on Cybertron!”

“You’re starting to sound like Lugnut.”

“Lugnut is a loyal soldier.”

“He’s a fanatic. And you can’t deny that we’ve been in deep slag ever since we settled down here.”

“Why do you always make every conversation about politics? You know I hate politics!”

The voices faded as the pair of the scientists went deeper into the lab, and only then did Optimus realize that his time was almost up. He couldn’t stay here for much longer. After carefully crawling back, he transformed into the truck mode and hurried back to his quarters.

The scientists’ exchange gave him a lot to think of. First, there was relief: at least for now the Autobots were safe from a Decepticon attack. But there was also concern: Optimus assumed that Megatron would repeat his previous scheme and try to build a space bridge, but, apparently, he chose another approach.

A fleet of transwarp-capable cruisers. It was obvious that Strika wasn’t the only one who had qualms about the state of Decepticon ships, but Megatron wasn’t stupid. Optimus could bet the old warlord had a plan of some sorts, and in his possession a fleet of ships that could appear at any point of space was a terrifying weapon.

Optimus had to stop him, one way or another.

Despite Optimus’s best efforts, he couldn’t find out where the mysterious “vault” was located. It was madness to try and wrench the precious prototype out of the Decepticons’ hands directly, but the excessive search of the lab complex brought no results.

In the end, Optimus came to a conclusion that perhaps the vault wasn’t in the lab complex. After all, he wasn’t the only one who could travel between the two buildings.

This led Optimus to where he was now: cramped down in the narrow shaft that linked many of the citadel’s chambers together. Optimus was moving past empty meeting rooms and tech cupboards filled with unknown equipment, past command centers where some ‘cons were stuck on monitor duty, and past personal offices (for instance, he could enjoy the sight of Air Commander Scrash snoring with his head on a pile of datapads). There was no trace of any vaults or treasures, but Optimus didn’t despair and proceeded to add notes to the map projected on his HUD.

The voices coming from another office distracted him from his search. He knew this office – he visited it once, when Strika invited him for a talk; these voices he also knew, and Optimus was preparing to gather some high profile intel, when the sounds that accompanied those voices finally registered in his processor.

Heat flooded Optimus’s cheeks, the rush of energon thrumming in his audials. Oh sweet Allspark. Oh damn. Oh frag.

Yeah, “frag” was exactly what was going on down there.

The right thing, the polite thing was to retreat slowly and leave the couple alone; spying on other people interfacing was wrong. Yet something molten was churning in his tank, a tangle of emotions Optimus couldn't really grasp, and he was lured to the ventilation cover, as if drawn by the thin streaks of light coming from the dimly lit room.

Strika was sitting on her office chair with one side turned to the desk, so that Optimus could see everything as clearly as a spectator in the front row. Megatron was kneeling between Strika's spread thighs, and his mouth was latched on the femme's interface array, lips stretched around the base of what looked like the biggest connector Optimus had ever seen. Which explained obscene slurping and squelching sounds. A mess of fluids on the floor and on their plating indicated that the two had been going at it for quite a while.

Optimus's optics flashed, sparking, and he had to put a hand over his mouth to force back any sounds. His chest hurt, acidic burning filling it, he felt hot, hot and furious and *betrayed*. How could they? How could *he*? Traces of Megatron's taste were searing his lips, ghosts of touches slithering down his thighs, and all of it was defiled, soiled by this... atrocity!

What about poor Lugnut? Wasn't Strika bonded? How could Megatron do such a... such a *vile* thing behind his vassal's back?! How dare he just... sleep around like this, when it was...

It was undignified! Wrong! Megatron was the Lord of the Decepticons!

Well, he did say that he had an army of 'cons who'd gladly come to his berth, and the Autobots always loved to speculate about debauchery that was going on among Decepticon ranks...

But it was still outrageous! Optimus couldn't fully explain why, but it was!

His line of thought was interrupted when Megatron let Strika's spike slip out of his mouth and coughed, oral lubricant staining his lips.

“Easy there.” Strika wiped a glistening trail off his chin. “You are very eager today. Is your Autobot still giving you the cold shoulder?”

“He has *moral principles*,” Megatron said, stroking the femme's spike. Optimus gulped; the thing was *enormous*, lying in Megatron's hand heavy and swollen, red biolights blinking in synchrony, bright in the semi-darkness of the office. The Prime shifted, rubbing his thighs together; suddenly he felt inadequate.

“Ah, *those*,” Strika laughed softly. “Well, I hope to convert you back to proper Decepticon fragging.”

Megatron chuckled, giving the tip of the spike a playful peck.

“Pity Lugnut's not here. He'll miss the oral action, and he doesn't get much, considering that neither of you has a suitable mouth.”

“Oh, don't worry about him. My beloved consort is confident in my abilities to please you, and my tales of your satisfaction will be enough for him.”

Instead of replying, Megatron simply took the spike in his mouth again.

Optimus's fingers curled. His optics burned, unshed sparks scorching them, but he was unable to look away. This was the right time to get out of here, he shouldn't watch it, he shouldn't even *care*

– yet his body refused to move. His spark was pounding in his chest, bloated and throbbing.

He watched how Megatron's red optics shut, how his throat cables moved as he pushed forward, forcing the giant spike deeper. He gave Optimus the same treatment before, but it never was like this; their size difference allowed Optimus's spike to slip inside easily. Optimus could never stuff his mouth like this, offer such a challenge. And Megatron was humming in pleasure as he tried to suck on the huge spike, throat convulsing around it and oral lubricant dribbling down his chin; his hands lay on Strika's thighs, scraping at them, encouraging – and she revved her engine.

“Hold still,” she rumbled, placing one hand on the back of Megatron's helm – very lightly, Optimus noted, - and made a first tentative thrust.

Megatron choked, the sound muffled by the thick shaft in his mouth, but his cooling fans roared – and it was all permission Strika required. She began moving her hips – short, steady shoves, in and out, in and out, easing her spike back and then plunging in her lord's welcoming throat. And Megatron held still, just like she asked, his optics closed in bliss and engine joining the screech of overworked coolers.

Optimus couldn't even blink, his gaze fixed on the lecherous display before him. He was vaguely aware of his straining spike and the wetness behind his interface panel, everything dulled by the wrenching ache that clutched his spark. Megatron didn't need him; Optimus always knew Megatron didn't need him, he was just having a fun affair, he always had his subordinates, all much more experienced than Optimus, all much more aware of his desires and ever-ready to serve; Megatron didn't need him now and never actually needed him before, not like Optimus needed him, not like Optimus wanted him...

It was his greatest shame he had just come to realize: that he *needed* the attentions of the Decepticon leader.

He was pathetic.

Strika's grip on Megatron's helm tightened as she arched, her hips twitching uncontrollably, and she spilled in Megatron's mouth. The warlord let her come to her senses, and then pulled back, a small smirk playing on his darkened lips; the stray drop of coolant trickled from the corner of his mouth. He collected it and lapped it up.

“Are you satisfied?” Strika asked, her voice a bit distorted after the overload.

“Pretty much.” Megatron stood up, licking his fingers clean, his tone business-like once again. As if nothing special had happened. “How about some refueling?”

“The dispenser is at your disposal.” Strika took out a cloth out of her subspace and wiped herself and the floor out, while Megatron was making an energon mix. Demonstratively casual. Distant.

Was this what interface among the Decepticons was like? Then Megatron had been sweetening it for Optimus's sake, as it would seem.

“Well?” Strika leaned back on her chair as she took the cube Megatron brought her. “Was I better than your Autobot?”

Megatron's optics narrowed.

“You seem to be awfully preoccupied with him.”

Strika shrugged.

“Everybody is preoccupied with him. He’s quite an eyesore. Walking around freely, making acquaintances, openly defying you... Some soldiers are beginning to wonder if you’ve gone soft.”

This time Megatron’s glare was positively threatening.

“Are you, Strika?” he said in a dangerously even tone.

The change in the femme was instant: her relaxed pose turned alert, back hunched and head lowered in a show of submission. Her informal manners were dropped immediately.

“Of course not, lord Megatron. Forgive me if I sounded presumptuous.”

“Watch your tongue.” Megatron’s frown didn’t dissipate for a klik longer. “I don’t want to see my General of Destruction follow my last Second-in-Commands steps.”

“Never, my lord!” Strika gave him a deep bow. “But, if I may speak freely..?”

“Permission granted.”

“You seem distracted of late. People think it’s connected to the Autobot, but regardless of what people say, I’m concerned about you. Is there... any way I can help?”

Megatron surveyed her for a klik longer and then sighed; his shoulders drooped.

“No... I don’t think you can. But yes, it is connected to the Autobot.” He twirled the energon cube in his hands. “He made me wonder – am I losing my touch? I did everything in my power to win him over, and on personal level it kind of worked. But I cannot persuade him to defect, no matter what I do.”

“Well, you said it yourself: he has moral principles.”

“That’s the point! Some days ago he told me that he could get behind our cause in its early years, that we were right to rise against the Autobots.” Megatron put the half-empty cube on the table and turned around, walking to a low shelf near the wall where Optimus was hiding. He leaned on the shelf, proud back bent; Strika couldn’t see his face this way, but from his point behind the ventilation cover Optimus saw it clearly, and the expression was so strikingly foreign for Megatron, so weary and defeated that the Prime’s spark twisted.

“Tell me, Strika,” the warlord muttered, “when was the last time we had a new recruit who wasn’t a wanted criminal or a clone?”

“Blackarachnia,” Strika suggested diligently.

“And she was the only one in how long?”

The answer was silence; Strika recognized a rhetorical question when she heard one.

“I wanted my Decepticons to have a future.” Red light in Megatron’s optics dwindled. He had never looked so old; it was like all those long millions of years of war and struggle have finally caught up to him. “But right now we have none. There is no future for a race that can’t procreate. I hoped the Allspark could give us life, but it’s in Autobot hands again, and all we got out of it was a bunch of Starscream’s clones.”

“At least they turned out alright, or so I heard,” Strika tried to joke. She didn’t see what Optimus could see, but maybe she felt something in Megatron’s voice. “Seems like Starscream perfected

Blackarachnia's technology. Another Toxitron would've been too much to bear."

The corner of Megatron's mouth went up.

"You can't blame her; Toxitron was the first prototype."

"She must've *really* hated Optimus Prime if she used his CNA for experimenting." Strika cackled. "Poor lad."

Optimus squirmed in his hideaway. Now Toxitron's creepy resemblance to him became even more disturbing... and sadder. How deep did Elita's grudge run...

"If only we were able to clone Perceptor right. But at least Magnificus turned out normal; he might not have Perceptor's scientific genius, but a talented diplomat is a good addition to our ranks." Megatron straightened his back. The moment of weakness had passed, and the warlord collected himself once more; Optimus saw him shut his optics for a second, and when they lit up again, Megatron had his frame under control. Calm, confident and dignified – exactly like a lord should be.

"I must get back to my office, Shockwave'll be giving a report in five klicks. Thanks for the relaxing and invigorating break." He smirked.

"You are welcome, my lord," Strika inclined her head. "I'm always at your service."

Only then did Optimus notice that his timer had been flashing warnings on his HUD for quite a while now. Biting his lip to muffle a curse, he backed away as quickly as the narrow tunnel allowed. The only consolation was that Shockwave was probably absorbed with preparing that report.

Next two days didn't grant Optimus any peace of mind. He couldn't stop thinking of what he saw and heard, and couldn't even concentrate on his quest for the vault. The problem was that he failed to figure out what bothered him more: that look on Megatron's face, the topic of his conversation with Strika, their, apparently, not-so-illicit affair or the discovery about Toxitron's origins. It all was too much in one day.

What Optimus knew for sure was that he couldn't take seeing Megatron or Strika; he would melt through the floor out of embarrassment if he did... or snap at them. Which was pretty foolish – and senseless. Screw him, if Megatron wanted to frag half of the city, he was more than welcome!

[Optimus? Are you in your quarters? I'll be there in a klick; we need to talk.]

Speak of the devil. The wave of panic came over Optimus, making his throat constrict and his energon go cold in his fuel lines. Oh frag; oh frag! Was he spotted back then? Did Megatron catch him spying? By the Allspark, if he was discovered... Megatron didn't sound angry, but he was a master of self-control, and what if he knew..!

Unfortunately (or, maybe, fortunately), before Optimus could do anything a polite beep signaled that Megatron was already at his door.

[Come in,] Optimus said over comm line, since he wasn't sure of his vocalizer's ability to produce coherent sounds.

And then he was alone with Megatron again, the warlord's presence filling the apartment, making

it seem smaller, tighter, hotter. Optimus swallowed a lump in his throat and gestured to the simple chair at the table – a clumsy attempt at hospitality.

Looking Megatron in the face was still awkward; memories of those lips stained with coolant haunted Optimus's CPU, disrupting his barely-held composure with indignation he wasn't supposed to feel.

"Well?" Optimus coughed. "What did you want to talk about?"

Sweet Allspark, please help him, please let it be something else! Anything else!

"It's about your friend. Sentinel Magnus."

Optimus blinked, his prayer forgotten mid-sentence.

"What about him?" A terrible premonition uncoiled in his chest.

Megatron lowered himself on the chair.

"Our intelligence informed me that he went MIA some time ago."

Optimus reeled, his legs suddenly becoming weak.

"Sentinel... went MIA? Where?"

To Megatron's credit, his expression was solemn.

"It would appear the Autobot High Command tried to keep this information in secret, at least for a while, but they had to explain the Magnus's absence in public at last. According to our sources, Sentinel went missing during the battle for the space bridge of Velocitron. The battle was lost, and the space bridge destroyed; presumably, by Sentinel. There was no news from him after that."

Optimus sat down on his berth, for once forgetting to care about showing weakness in front of the Decepticon. The floor before his optics was slipping away.

When he managed to meet Megatron's gaze again, his voice almost didn't tremble.

"Why are you telling me that?" he asked quietly. It went against all logic. This information was bound to make Optimus want to leave, to look for Sentinel, to help the leaderless Autobot Commonwealth... Megatron should've kept it to himself.

But there was something in the curve of Megatron's lips, in the light of his optics – a glimpse of the expression Optimus saw from the ventilation shaft.

"Because I believe this is something you deserve to know," he replied just as softly.

Optimus forbade himself to think of Sentinel's death.

There was no confirmation of his demise, no certainty; for all they knew, Sentinel could be travelling to Cybertron with the remnants of his team, or hiding on overrun Velocitron, or taken captive by the Quintessons (alright, that was a bad idea; the scraplet pit was too fresh in Optimus's memory).

Optimus had already made a mistake of assuming that one of his friends died, and look how it

ended. But Elita survived – and there was no reason not to give Sentinel a chance. Cybertron’s new Magnus wasn’t going to give up on his post and future glory so easily.

So Optimus hoped and believed – and, while he mostly succeeded at pushing the images of Sentinel’s broken, burnt and eviscerated body deep into the back of his processor, another thought occupied it freely.

The Autobots were leaderless, probably in disarray – and all of it in the middle of war. In a very short time they lost the entirety of their military High Command: Ultra Magnus, Sentinel, Rodimus Prime, Longarm Prime... Megatron said that Alpha Trion took over as a temporary steward until Sentinel resurfaced or was confirmed dead, but Alpha Trion was old, and no one had seen him on the battlefield for eons. Sentinel wasn’t perfect, but he was a leader – one who was ready to accept responsibility and make decisions, one who was embodying the Autobot cause. Losing him must’ve had a devastating effect on the Autobots’ morale. Megatron didn’t elaborate on that, but Optimus wasn’t stupid; he could calculate what was happening on Cybertron right now.

At least his friends were alright. According to Megatron’s sources, Ratchet, Arcee and Omega Supreme were fine, locked in a stalemate with the Quints near one of the still active space bridges, and Bumblebee and Sari were alright too. For some unfathomable reason the Quintessons left Earth alone, despite the working and relatively unprotected space bridge at the top of the Sumdac Tower.

Optimus caught himself spending long cycles at the window, staring up into New Kaon’s bleak sky. More than anything he wanted to get off this planet, to find his friends, to help them... But what could he do? He wasn’t even able to locate the stolen plasma dynamic thruster. He was an exile, and most likely a traitor.

He was just one bot.

Optimus wanted to make a difference, but how? His jetpack was left on Cybertron, as was the Magnus Hammer, and without them Optimus was just another Autobot soldier. He wasn’t some hero who could come to his comrades’ aid at sunrise with an army under his command.

On the other hand... There *was* an army. A capable, seasoned, powerful army of mechs that were literally *created* for war.

Optimus evaded this idea at first; then he tried to tentatively mull over it. But the more he thought about it, the more his initial repulsion wavered.

The Decepticons were Cybertronians too, right?

They all wanted to go back to Cybertron, so they had to care for their homeworld’s well-being. Meaning they would (potentially) fight for it. And Quintessons were greater enemies than the Autobots (or so Optimus hoped). If the Decepticons helped to win the war, if they joined the Autobots and chased the invaders away, surely some treaty could be forged? They could be allowed to return, to repopulate their cities, their two races could share Cybertron again...

Or maybe the old hate was too strong, and this endeavor would only end in a massacre.

Would Optimus really be the Autobot who invited their worst enemies to Cybertron?

Sorry for the terrible delay, everyone! I really hope I won't have to leave this story for so long again. In any case, I plan to finish it, no matter what real life demands of me. :)

Part III, Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Okay, so what’s the plan, sir?” Jetfire moved closer to Sentinel, yellow optics glowing with the same eagerness his brother’s blue visor sported, but stopped before their EM fields could touch. The twins’ initial aloofness melted away some solar cycles ago; they seemed to have forgiven Sentinel, but they still kept their distance.

He convinced himself that he forgave them as well. It was easier to be around them that way. It would’ve been unwise to anger two Decepticon hybrids when Sentinel’s life depended on their whims.

Sentinel opened his mouth, but then paused and glanced at Slipstream. Their small group had its own hierarchy, and the Decepticon femme resided at the very top of it. After dozens of arguments and jabs that ended in the same way (with Slipstream making him apologize) Sentinel decided that he had had enough humiliation.

The femme tapped a claw against her chin, surveying the holographic map of the system. They were currently hiding on an asteroid near Opulus, the local colony world. Just like all Autobot colonies in possession of a space bridge, it was besieged, and the four travelers had a Quintesson fleet between them and the Autobot troops.

“We are few in numbers, but we have the element of surprise; those squids are busy with the Autobots and don’t expect an attack, especially by such an insignificant unit. What do you think?” She suddenly looked at Sentinel. “You know how the Autobots operate; will they help us?”

Sentinel found himself caught unawares. He got so used to the femme commanding, that he was unprepared for giving an opinion, especially when she was staring at him like that, those slanted red optics piercing and questioning...

Sentinel rolled his shoulders and straightened his back. He will show that wench how the real Magnus acted! She would have to admit his mind was sharp and his decisions sound... Not “moronic blabbering of a pompous ass”, as she described them.

“If I declare my presence, they *will* help. Technically while I live I am still their Supreme Commander. This will put us at risk, since the Quintessons will no doubt attempt to annihilate us, but they will do it anyway. Small squad or large, it doesn’t matter to them; they proved to be very thorough. I say, we fly directly and try to muscle through their lines, and when it becomes too hot, I hail the Autobot frequencies and order an attack. In the ensuing chaos we have a chance of reaching our forces.”

“You do realize our fighting abilities are seriously impaired, since one of us has to carry you?” Slipstream arched an optic ridge.

Sentinel paused. She was right, and there was a way that could solve this problem, but he wasn’t looking forward to voicing it. It was a memory he preferred to avoid most of the time, and he definitely didn’t want to relive it...

He didn’t have much of a choice, though.

“Optimus and I once fought in space,” he said hesitantly. “He had me tied to his grappling hook

and used the cable to move me in vacuum. That way we both could fight.”

“I remember it! We were there!” Jetfire exclaimed. Slipstream regarded them with interest.

“Do we have a rope?”

“I have a tow cable,” Sentinel confessed, accepting his fate. Fighting, even in such a degrading state, was better than being a dead weight clinging to another’s wings.

“Oooh, sounds crazy! I like!” Jetstorm clapped his hands, and Jetfire grinned.

It hurt, seeing them like this. Like it was the past, when they still belonged to the same side, and the twins were just his unruly subordinates. Like they weren’t escaped convicts with Decepticon code tainting their systems.

Although it was tainting their systems back then too.

A twinge of guilt twisted in Sentinel’s chest at that thought. He missed the pit-spawned glitches and their loud, but secure presence behind his back. Being a Magnus was a lonely job, especially when everything began falling apart and nobody in the High Command seemed to support him or to believe in him. Even Jazz gave him that skeptical look when he thought Sentinel didn’t see it. Sentinel swore that he would show them all what a great Magnus he was... And he failed.

But not completely failed, Sentinel corrected himself. He was still alive, and he was coming back to reclaim his position and lead the Autobots to victory. He *will* prove his worth.

To them and to the Decepticon wench.

Not that her opinion mattered or anything.

Slipstream hummed, half-shutting her optics, but finally shrugged and closed the map.

“Whatever, I don’t have an alternate plan anyway. Besides, sometimes crazy plans are the best.” She dug into her subspace and took out four cans of Earth fuel. “Here, these are the last ones. We’ll need all our strength for that attack.”

Sentinel cringed, yet opened the can without complaint. The disgusting taste was permanently staining his mouth, but this was the only fuel available, and after these long days of flying through space Sentinel learned to take what luck offered to him.

In fact, taste wasn’t the only thing that was staining him. Sometimes Sentinel felt like the Decepticons were rubbing off him, leaving their – what? essence? filth? – on him, contaminating him. His movements became sharper, more calculated; his battle protocols were constantly alert, until at last it stopped bothering him. His plating was dull and scuffed, like he had no time to take care of himself (he really didn’t).

The more he looked at Slipstream, the more reasonable she seemed to him.

And he did look at her often. At first there were glares, venomous and full of silent vengeful promises; but she ignored them so easily that Sentinel couldn’t contain his rage and snapped at her – only to be brought to heel and forced to apologize right in front of the twins.

The derision hurt. The uncaring, disdainful glances wounded. And soon Sentinel found himself wanting to impress her, to make her take him seriously. Optimus always took him seriously, no matter how far apart they grew; the one who challenged Sentinel and made him prove himself was

Elita.

Elita, whom he missed so dearly.

It is an insult, he told himself as he was rolling on the ground in the night, trying to recharge; he can't compare Elita to a Decepticon knock-off, Elita can't be compared to anyone! And they weren't that much alike, really: so yes, both femmes were cocky and sarcastic and teased him with no mercy, but Elita was bright and cheerful, she was loyal and noble and a true Autobot...

Slipstream's agreement with his plan sent warmth running from his spark to every corner of his frame. This was more than any of the Councilors ever gave him. They always looked like they'd just smelled something foul when they agreed to his demands.

And so he prayed to the Allspark (or to whatever force could hear him) for this plan to work.

He couldn't fail this time.

Sentinel's plan worked indeed. They were deep among the alien spiral shapes of the Quintesson ships, chased and surrounded by smaller fighter vehicles, when Sentinel finally broke the radio silence.

[Sentinel Magnus to all Autobot forces: I require back-up! Join with my team and escort us to Opulus!]

There was a click, and the comm line went online.

[Sentinel?] That was Jazz's voice. [You're alive?!]

[I'm not that easy to kill,] Sentinel couldn't help but boast. He rehearsed that phrase in his head a dozen times. [We were flying all the way from Velocitron and we aren't high on fuel.]

['We'?]

[Back-up, Jazz!]

[Chill out, SM. Our bots are on their way.]

Sentinel decided to drop the subject and reprimand Jazz for his familiarity when they were all safe at the base.

He forgot about that the moment his feet touched the ground, Safeguard putting him down carefully and separating into the twins. Slipstream landed a little to the side with a light tap of her heels against the pavement.

And cycled up her null rays when the surrounding Autobots raised their weapons. The twins growled behind Sentinel's back, and he could hear the distinct whirr of their battle systems heating up again.

"Don't move, Decepticon!" Jazz commanded. "You're under arrest. Now get away from our Magnus and..."

"Stop!" Sentinel raised his hands, stepping between his companions and Jazz. "They are on our side! Slipstream, Jetfire, Jetstorm, put down the cannons. The rest of you, at ease!"

The Autobots began exchanging doubtful looks, and Sentinel felt the familiar rage boil in his chest. Insubordinate glitches, he left for a deca-cycle, and they'd already forgotten how to obey their Magnus!

"I said *stand down!* That is an order!" he yelled, and finally – finally! – shockers and swords were lowered.

"But sir, aren't these two wanted fugitives..? And that femme a Decepticon?" some young soldier dared to inquire.

"As a matter of fact, 'these two' and the femme saved your Magnus's life and helped detonate the Veocitronian space bridge, so it didn't fall into Quintesson hands. Something I didn't see you doing!" Sentinel crossed his arms, giving the little grunt the most condescending look he was capable of. "So hereby I grant them amnesty and install Jetfire and Jetstorm back into the Elite Guard."

Twin gasps came from behind his back, and then Sentinel nearly lost his balance when he was jumped by two heavy frames that hugged him, thus ruining the importance of the moment.

"Really, sir?"

"Really?!"

"Thank you!"

"Thank you, Sentinel Magnus, sir!"

"Alright, alright, stop it! Behave yourself, or I'll have to demote you again!" At last Sentinel succeeded at pushing the twins away and locked optics with Jazz. The ninja-bot was smiling.

"Good to have you all back," he said, and for once that sounded absolutely sincere. But then his gaze shifted to Slipstream. "And you..?"

"She is under amnesty too," Sentinel interrupted, surprised by the sudden rush of heat to his face. "She, um, is a great asset in battle, and she doesn't affiliate herself with Megatron's Decepticons. So she stays. If, um, she wants to." He cast a quick glance at Slipstream, growing more and more bewildered by his own unsureness.

Slipstream regarded him for a moment, her expression unreadable, - and then shrugged.

"I can stay, why not? Somebody's gotta watch the twins."

It took some willpower for Sentinel to keep a straight face. He... didn't know what reaction was proper. He didn't even know *how* he wanted to react. All he knew was that for the first time Slipstream looked at him with curiosity rather than contempt.

And he liked it.

Sentinel coughed.

"Good!" He turned to his troops, trying not to think of Slipstream's attention on his back. "And that reminds me; Jazz, during my travels I saw enough evidence that air superiority can indeed be a decisive factor in this war and in any future wars the Autobot Commonwealth will face. I need to get to Cybertron, and as soon as I deal with the most pressing matters, I will approach the Council with an offer to continue research started by Project Safeguard." He started walking to the local

command center, the Autobots making way for him. “Flight-capable soldiers are the future of Cybertron, and we must find new, better ways of developing this ability...”

Megatron was staring at Shockwave’s latest report and couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He reread it twice to confirm that he wasn’t hallucinating, then put the datapad down, rose from his chair and walked to the window, unable to sit idly.

It was impossible. It couldn’t be real, couldn’t *exist*. Sentinel – *the* Sentinel, the idiot who made those ridiculous propaganda videos, who organized a stunt show to glorify himself and mock Megatron and Optimus at once, who condemned his own soldiers for being made into flightframes – Sentinel Magnus returned to Cybertron with the Jettwings and the female Starscream clone, and he *welcomed* them!

Yet there was no reason to mistrust Shockwave – the old spy always checked and double-checked his information before presenting it to his lord. Either the Autobot Intelligence Service suddenly upped their skills tenfold and fabricated this story for some unfathomable reason... or it was true.

It had to be a ruse. It had to be. But Sentinel was never known for elaborate political games or intrigues; in fact, he was painfully straightforward.

Megatron leaned on the windowsill, unseeing optics fixed on the dull rooftops of New Kaon.

Optimus’s voice came to haunt him again – the words he dismissed as wistful thinking of a naïve idealistic child. *Peace*. There could be no peace between their races, history proved it. It was us or them, no middle ground, no mercy for the losers.

Yet there was Sentinel Magnus, the thick-headed buffoon, allowing a flightframe walk freely around Iacon.

Megatron’s chest was hurting. Something hot and sickly dispersed through his fuel lines from the tight knot of his spark.

Being proven wrong was shameful.

Being proven wrong by Sentinel was twice as shameful.

Megatron gritted his dental plated, and the windowsill cracked under his fingers.

A sudden urge to move, to storm out of the room and find oblivion overwhelmed him. He needed to take his mind off this – to spar, to fly, to frag, whatever. The image of Optimus flashed before his vision again, of Optimus sprawled before him, open and trusting and wanton... Was it something about the peace-born Autobots that made them trust their sworn enemies?

Megatron briefly considered calling for Strika, but the idea caused him to grimace. Somehow his recent trysts with Strika and her consort stopped being satisfying; if anything, they left Megatron even more restless than before. Strika and Lugnut were good people and good subordinates – but maybe this was the case. Megatron didn’t want a subordinate.

He was so tired.

Before his CPU settled on some course of action, Megatron was already reaching for his commlink.

[Optimus? Come to my quarters. There are news for you.]

Optimus's face was like a ray of sunshine in the dark room. Megatron was still amazed by how *different* the Prime was from the rest of New Kaon's inhabitants; it wasn't even about his physical measurements. It was in his expression, in his movements, in the tone of his voice – the features of a child who knew no war. It didn't make him less mature or less capable, though, and this was what puzzled Megatron the most. Peace-born civilian builds weren't supposed to be formidable enemies. They were pathetic. They couldn't be respected. They...

Optimus mumbled a greeting and raised his optic ridges in silent question. He appeared a little flustered – truth to be told, he often appeared flustered in Megatron's presence nowadays.

"You said you had news for me?" Optimus reminded when the silence became too oppressive.

Megatron snapped out of his trance.

"Yes. I believe it would be good news. Your friend Sentinel appeared on Opulus several solar cycles ago. He is healthy and unharmed." Optimus's optics widened, and Megatron made a pause, contemplating his choices. "The Jettwins are with him," he added at last. "They saved his life during the battle of Velocitron, so he granted them amnesty and took them back into the Elite Guard." He decided not to inform Optimus about the female clone. It wasn't that important anyway.

"By the Allspark..." The ability to speak finally returned to Optimus, and he pressed his hands to his chest, his EM field exploding with joy. "Thank goodness. *Thank goodness!*" When he met Megatron's gaze again, Optimus's optics were shimmering.

Megatron couldn't help it. His hand rose in the air as if on its own and lay on Optimus's shoulder.

"I can't say I'm glad about Sentinel's safe return," he said bluntly, "but I'm glad that you feel better."

Optimus was still looking up at him – and gave a smile so bright it was almost painful. For a fleeting moment Megatron thought that Optimus would hug him, and that fluid EM field indeed lurched towards him, a flare of golden warmth – but instead Optimus simply lifted his hand and placed it on Megatron's palm, tiny blue fingers curling around larger black ones.

"Thank you," Optimus said. "For telling me. I know you didn't have to."

And suddenly it was like nothing happened between them, like there was no argument and no clash of irreconcilable points of view. Slowly, steadily Megatron dropped on one knee before the Prime, leaned closer – Optimus rose on his tiptoes, reaching up – and in the next second they were kissing. Megatron shut his optics, reveling in the soft pressure against his lips; for now it was just that – a feather-like kiss, a wordless offering of truce and acceptance. But when Optimus moaned quietly into his mouth, Megatron answered: a parting of his lips, a flicker of tongue, and soon Optimus was clinging to him like a starved mech. Blue fingers tightened their grip around his digits, smaller EM field melting into his.

When Megatron took him to the berthroom, Optimus didn't resist.

Some part of Optimus noted that, perhaps, he shouldn't be doing this. He was keeping away from

the war-mongering tyrant, wasn't he?

But something was different this time – about him, about Megatron. Optimus wouldn't be able to explain what it was if he was asked, but he sensed it in the way their frames fit together, in the way their fields intertwined. There was some... need in Megatron that wasn't there before; the warlord's usual casual detachment was gone. Optimus didn't know why, but he didn't care: all he cared about was how *right* it all felt. He wanted to wipe out all the troubling ideas, to wash away the traces of that scene with Strika that he saw and all those scenes he didn't see. Optimus wasn't going to be just another berthwarmer. He was going... He was...

He had no time to think about what he was, because he was too busy right now.

Squirming out of Megatron's arms, he pushed the warlord to rest on his back and crawled between his legs. Catching the Decepticon's amused gaze, he made a show out of licking his lips, all embarrassment forgotten. So Megatron thought Strika with her thick spike could give him something Optimus couldn't? Well Optimus too had something neither she, nor Lugnut could give him!

Megatron retracted his interface panel without further prompting, and Optimus purred, arching his back like a true pleasurebot and bowing down to lick at the connector's tip. It was still cool, charge only starting to tickle Optimus's tongue, but he was determined to change it soon enough. And change it he did, the thick cables warming up on his glossa. Optimus dimmed his optics and swirled his tongue, hungry for that tangy taste of charge and hot metal. Megatron was always so quick to respond to the lightest of his touches! It was... an empowering thought, really, and as Optimus sucked at the connector's head (he couldn't take much more in his mouth, to be frank), he dared to let his hand release the spike's base and slide lower to probe at the port's entrance.

Megatron tensed. An uneasy ripple went through his EM field, and although Megatron managed to take it under control, he wasn't able to hide the tautness in his body.

Optimus let out a soothing hum, stroking the port's rim gently but not venturing further, giving Megatron time to refuse. No sound came from the warlord's except for the whirr of his cooling fans, so Optimus supposed he had permission; slowly, carefully he pushed one finger inside. He had never considered to take a go at Megatron's port before, but the image of the warlord on his knees between Strika's thighs chased him, and he wanted more. Megatron obviously wasn't opposed to being on the receiving end of interface with his soldiers, so it was okay, right?

Except that Megatron didn't relax, and his field remained tucked tight to his body. Confused, Optimus let the spike slip out of his mouth and cast a questioning glance at him.

"Are you alright? We can do it the usual way if you don't want to."

"I'm fine," Megatron rasped, looking somewhere past Optimus's head. "Simply wasn't prepared."

"I thought you didn't mind submitting in berth." Optimus wiggled his fingers, teasing the tender mesh, and felt the port cycle down on his digits.

This time Megatron locked optics with him.

"I don't like being fragged by Autobots."

"It's because you didn't try," Optimus joked, winking. But the laughter died in his throat when he saw Megatron's expression. "Or did you?"

"I was a gladiator, Optimus," Megatron said dryly. "Gladiators were supposed to bring their

masters profit... in every possible way.”

Optimus froze.

“What..?”

His fingers in Megatron’s port went numb. Optimus gulped, but the lump in his throat stayed.

“It was long ago, Optimus.” Megatron’s voice softened. “I’m willing to try it with you.”

“I...” Optimus stared at his hand that was still pressed to Megatron’s array. A wave of nausea churned his tanks, and he snatched his fingers away like they were burned. “I can’t.”

“I wouldn’t have let you near my port if I didn’t want it.”

Optimus shook his head, his EM field pulsing in distress, memories of their meetings in Trypticon – *Megatron offering this to him* – leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“You don’t understand. I... I can’t!” It was hard to form words; he had to force them out, his mind racing in all directions at once.

Megatron’s optics darkened.

“What is it, Autobot? Too disgusted to frag a well-used whore?”

Air was knocked out of Optimus’s vents at the accusation; vocalizer clicked idly, and energon roared in his audials. He opened his mouth, but made no sound, his frame nearly paralyzed.

Megatron’s expression stiffened, and he closed his interface panel with a click that seemed awfully loud.

“Get out.” Even his growl was cold.

“I...”

“Get out!” Megatron sat up on the berth, suddenly towering over Optimus again, and behind all the anger and fury in his optics Optimus saw something new, something that was meant to be sealed away forever but still burst through: shame.

And Megatron hated to be ashamed.

Stricken by fear, Optimus swung his legs to the side, jumped to the floor and dashed out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

OMG teh drama!

Part III, Chapter 8

Idiot.

He was such an idiot.

Optimus groaned and let his head fall on the datapad he was trying (and failing) to read. Scratch's concerned face appeared over an aisle.

"Are you well, Optimus Prime?"

"Fine," the Prime muttered, but then realized that he looked far from fine and raised his head, forcing his voice to sound normal. Normal-ish. "No, seriously, I'm fine. Just tired, that's all. Been working too much."

"Oh, okay." Scratch's face disappeared. Fortunately, he wasn't the most caring creature, even despite his recently acquired respect for the Autobot.

Truth to be told, Optimus hardly managed any work in the last two days. He confined himself to the library, but the texts and maps escaped his attention, and he could stare at the same page for an hour without memorizing anything. He should be planning his escape, but all he could think about was the hurt in Megatron's optics, the look of trust tentatively given and broken.

What is it, Autobot? Too disgusted to frag a well-used whore?

A shudder ran through Optimus's frame, and he covered his burning finials. He felt like the lowest kind of dirt, but the mere thought of walking up to Megatron, of apologizing, was terrifying. When he met the warlord in the hallway last morning, Optimus practically ran past him, half-deaf and half-blind and hating himself even more for his cowardice. But he couldn't, he simply couldn't..!

He didn't know how to deal with this.

He almost wished that Megatron would punish him, throw him in a cell, but nothing changed for Optimus except for the coldness in Megatron's general attitude. Strika sent him a questioning glare too, although Optimus pretended he didn't notice it.

Too disgusted to frag a well-used whore?

No, no, Optimus would never think of Megatron like that! Optimus would never think of anyone like that! Megatron wasn't a good person, but he was... No, he wasn't a friend either. In fact, what was he to Optimus..?

It didn't matter, really. Megatron didn't deserve it – neither what had been done to him, nor the cruel rejection.

But how could Optimus continue, when he knew what he reminded his partner of? How could he take his pleasure, when he knew what memories his blue optics invoked, when he felt Megatron tense and shiver underneath him?

And he screwed up even his attempt to be considerate, the fumbling fool.

He had to talk to Megatron. He had to explain himself, late it might be; he had to do it before he went through with his escape. He couldn't salvage their relationship, perhaps, but he didn't want to

leave with such a weight on his conscience.

Never before had the finality of his oncoming escape filled him with such dread.

Gathering up the remnants of his courage, Optimus opened a clear page on his datapad and prepared to write a speech.

Nightfall caught Optimus still crouching over his datapad with an empty file, several pages of text deleted from it and despair crawling under Optimus's plating. With a tired groan he switched off the datapad and stood up; perhaps a good walk could help him clear his head.

He was forbidden to stay outside after dark nowadays, so in a cycle he found himself roaming the upper floors of the command center. Here the windows were larger, and the passageways led to open terraces and balconies, concealed from below by the spiky ridges. Cold wind blew freely here, howling like a wild beastformer's engine – the only living being between the dark metal of the citadel and even darker abyss of the sky.

This dreary howling made Optimus's spark contort, so he preferred to hide behind the citadel's walls again. He found a window that was large enough to give him a good view of the starry sky and was ready to climb on the windowsill, when he noticed another presence. A large silhouette occupied the window next to him, black against the glass, and Optimus recognized the outlines.

Panic wrenched in his chest, and Optimus stepped back cautiously, trying to disappear as quietly as he came, when Megatron's deep voice rumbled:

"No need to be afraid. Stay, if you wish."

Optimus stopped, obeying without a second thought. The awkward silence lasted for a klik longer, until at last the Prime shifted and returned to his own window.

They stood like this for a while, watching the faint blinking of distant stars.

"I'm sorry," Optimus blurted out, surprising himself. He didn't intend to speak and had no speech prepared, but now that he started he couldn't stop, the words coming from within his very core. "I'm sorry I overstepped my boundaries, and I'm sorry I acted like a cowardly jerk. I never meant to imply that you're... to imply what you thought I implied. I didn't know what to say and I panicked. I... No, wait, it's all wrong." Optimus clutched his fists. "It's not about me, it's... What I want to say is that I acted like a jerk to you and I'm so sorry. I'm not... disgusted," he forced himself to grind out. "No, I *am* disgusted, but not by you."

"I know."

"It's those people at the arena who... Wait, you knew?" He was so bewildered that he actually turned to look at the warbuild.

Megatron never took his optics off the window.

"I know you didn't mean it that way. You were a virgin when we met, for spark's sake, of course you were confused by such confessions coming from the person whose port you've just shoved fingers in. Logically I understand it. Unfortunately, logical understanding can't always change one's perception. I knew you didn't mean it, but I wanted to think you did." He finally let his glance fall on Optimus. "Being a victim feels good, Optimus. Good and addicting. It makes everything you do justified."

Optimus gulped. He was threading on a dangerous ground here, but the words were still bursting out of him, demanding an exit, and he couldn't – didn't want to – contain them. He needed to say it.

"I think... I think that being a victim isn't something that can be judged. When terrible things are done to a person, the person is... bound to react illogically. In fact, we all act illogical all the time; this is what makes us sentient beings, I believe?" He gathered up his courage and put his hand on Megatron's arm. "There is nothing shameful about being a victim," he said firmly, despite his knees' wobbling. "There is nothing shameful about being angry, being hurt."

"I'm not..." Megatron began, but stopped under Optimus's gaze. Instead he resorted to simply shaking his head and turned to the window again.

He never brushed Optimus's hand off.

"There were... many Autobots seeking gladiators' company," Megatron said after a while, voice quiet. "One didn't speak of such indecent things in respectable society, but it only made them more attractive. Some wanted to be dominated by big strong warbuilds," a corner of his mouth went up as he peeked at Optimus, but the tiny smile faded before it was born. "Some wanted to put us in our place." He must've attempted to sound neutral, but Optimus shivered at the old, still raw bitterness of that phrase.

"You're right, I've never minded submitting in berth," Megatron continued, looking away. "It's just an interface position; nobody in the mines would've looked weird at you for that. Today you help out your partner, tomorrow they help you out – simple as that. But *they*... They truly made me feel... filthy."

"And I made you feel filthy again," Optimus finished just as quietly. His fingers on Megatron's plating went numb. "I..." His vocalized clicked idly, but Optimus wasn't going to let his stupid frame interfere; not now. Not when he had responsibility before his... companion. "I want you to know that never, not even for a second, did I think this way about you. And if there is someone who's filthy, it's them. I..." He didn't know what to say. No amount of words could suffice. So instead of speaking, Optimus squeezed Megatron's arm and expanded his EM field – a tide of warmth and care that were bubbling in his chest, ready to overflow every second.

Megatron's optics widened, but he composed himself and didn't reply. His field, however, molded itself to Optimus's nudge, guarded but opening slowly. The silence that hanged over them should've been heavy – yet for some reason it turned out to be comfortable.

"I think that's enough of brooding in the dark," Megatron uttered at last, a small smile playing on his lips. "How about we move to a lighter location?"

"Sure," Optimus murmured and sent back the same tentative smile. "Let's do that."

No room in the Decepticon citadel could be described as light, but compared to the upper-floor passageway Megatron's quarters were actually pretty well-lit; Optimus lived on New Kaon long enough for his optics to adjust to the permanent gloom.

It was a bit bizarre, to find himself at the place of his crime, every piece of furniture reminding him of that disastrous night. But the intertwined warmth of their EM fields lessened the effect, softening the angles and dissipating the irritating lump in Optimus's throat. He accepted the goblet of oil with gratitude; he would need courage and peace of mind the rich dark liquid brought.

Megatron's laugh interrupted the flow of his thoughts.

"Don't sit there all frightened and guilty, Optimus Prime. You have no fault in what happened millions of stellar cycles before your creation, and those who were at fault I killed long ago."

Here it went again. Megatron acting tough and denying himself the privilege of solace.

"You would probably say that my retaliation was overly excessive or something." Megatron was studying his own goblet, optics distant and smirk crooked.

"I... Can't really judge that," Optimus said. "And I won't. Although I have to admit that you do tend to react excessively." He chuckled. "Did you have to murder poor Megazarak after you overthrew him and took over as the Decepticon leader?"

"Megazarak led his own people into slavery." The lines of Megatron's face became harsh. "He got what was coming to him."

"But you exiled him at first. He lived at the far-off planet, alone and retired. Why did you have to send assassins after him?"

"He used to be a Decepticon leader." Megatron glowered. "He could attempt to usurp me."

"Did he try to? Ever?"

"...No."

"So he wasn't a threat."

"Are you insinuating that I'm paranoid?"

"No. I'm insinuating that you're prone to... How did you put it? Overly excessive measures."

"Like the Great War?"

The question hung in the air like an axe of an executioner: brutal, looming and capable of cutting something infinitely precious and terribly fragile that bound the two of them.

"No," Optimus said quietly, hands clasped around the goblet, - and realized that he meant it. How far did he stray from the course laid out for him by the teachers in the Academy... Every Autobot on Cybertron would call him a traitor and a madman, but he wasn't going to go back on his words.

"No," he repeated, raising his head and meeting Megatron's gaze. "The Great War was a tragedy, one that you or your people can't be blamed for, at least not entirely. But the Great War is over." He leaned to Megatron, using the newfound openness in their merged fields, and poured all sincerity he could master into his question.

"You said I have no fault in what happened millions of stellar cycles before my creation; you said that those at fault are dead. No Autobot on Cybertron carries any guilt before you. Do we have to fight, Megatron? Do we have to try wipe out each other's races, if all those who started it are dead?"

Megatron didn't answer, and Optimus put the goblet aside to grab the Decepticon's hands.

"I don't want to fight you," he breathed out, voice breaking down and his entire frame trembling. "I will if I must, but I don't want to!" The sudden image – the two of them locked in a never-ending combat, harming each other, tearing each other apart – filled him with dread he had never

expected to experience. “Why are we still calling each other enemies if there are true foes attacking Cybertron right now? They declared you an enemy of their state too, and I have no doubts they will come after your people as soon as they finish with mine. We cannot stand against them when we are divided! You brought me here, you wanted me to meet your people, to get to know them, and you succeeded! I don’t want to see New Kaon fall.” He felt his optics heat up, sparks ready to fly out of them, but he didn’t care if Megatron witnessed that ‘weakness’. What he wanted to say was too important. “I don’t want to see Scratch, or Lugnut, or Strika fall, just as I don’t want to see Bumblebee, Bulkhead and Ratchet die... Just as I don’t want to see *you* die.”

At this moment he was pulled forward, to that large solid frame, and the Decepticon’s powerful field surrounded Optimus like a warm cocoon.

“It won’t happen,” Megatron’s baritone rolled over his audial. “We are the warbuilds of Cybertron. We aren’t easily subjugated.”

“Yet you lost the war to us, and we are losing to the Quintessons.” Optimus closed his optics, pressing his cheek to the Decepticon’s chestplate. He felt strangely hollow, emptied by the recent outburst; a part of his mind was aware that there was something infinitely wrong in holding Megatron like this, but the idea didn’t register fully. The silence was soothing, as was the steady beat underneath grey armor.

“If this is any consolation at all,” Megatron uttered finally, “I would prefer not to fight you too.”

“I will if I must” hanged in the air, unspoken.

Optimus raised his head. His spark ached in premonition, and he wanted to kiss Megatron, to brand this moment in his mind, so it stayed with Optimus even when this semblance of peace between them was long gone. But Megatron outstripped him.

“Do you want to try again?” He asked, the same regret tainting his tone. “Spiking me?”

Optimus gasped.

“I... You don’t have to, I’m fine with...”

“I know I don’t have to,” Megatron interrupted. “I want it. I want to try it with you.”

Optimus surveyed the warlord’s face, searching for any trace of doubt, but Megatron seemed sincere, if a little apprehensive. But this was understandable after what Optimus did the last time.

It was a chance. He was offered a chance to mend his mistake, to overwrite old memories of violation and disgrace with pleasure and joy; Optimus wasn’t going to waste it.

He smiled.

“Yes.” He let his hands slide down Megatron’s chest, tracing the sleek predatory curves of his armor. “Then I’d like that.”

They spent several kliks in the same position – Optimus straddling Megatron’s lap – just kissing and holding each other close. Optimus didn’t want it to end, this point in time when everything was simple and well, when they had nowhere to hurry and no one to worry about. He wished to remember it and cherish it forever, especially when a tiny voice in his head told him that it could be their last time together.

When they moved to the berthroom, both were already revved up. Megatron lay on his back and retracted his interface panel, spreading his legs in a gesture that seemed... unpleasantly well-trained. But Optimus wasn't going to give the Decepticon a repeat of dozens of past frags; he intended to create some new memories tonight.

"Too disgusted?" echoed in his audials; but there was no disgust in him, and he was going to prove it to Megatron once and for all. Optimus settled between the warlord's legs, leaned down and placed a gentle kiss to the largest of blinking purple biolights.

Megatron's vents hitched, and his port's protective diaphragm shut, but Optimus read no true distress in his field – just wariness. Smiling, he traced the rim of the port with his lips, leaving kisses all over it. Rare flicks of his tongue made Megatron's thighs twitch, but with every lick and every peck Optimus felt the port's mechanisms relax, shutter petals opening slowly. Optimus glanced at the warlord's face to check if he was alright; Megatron's optics were closed, lips slightly parted, and his fingers burrowed into the padding – but there was no sign of rejection. Faint sheen of lubricant was forming on the port's edge, and Optimus decided that it was his cue.

Putting his hands on the hip joints and letting his fingers dig between the black plates, Optimus dove back and gave the port's entrance a long sweep with his tongue. Megatron gasped; Optimus grinned against the moist metal and pressed his advantage, slipping his glossa inside.

He had never eaten out anyone before, so he was improvising, but judging by the fervent spasms of the port's inner walls, Optimus was doing well. He licked those walls thoroughly, mapping the sensor nodes, and twisted his tongue; the rich taste of lubricant, so unlike the tangy cold of coolant, coated his mouth, and Optimus purred, exhibiting his delight in every way he could. Megatron's biolights were glowing like in fever, pulsing bright purple, and sometimes Optimus switched to kissing and nipping at them. Megatron's thighs were trembling under his palms until Optimus couldn't stop their shaking, but when he raised his head to look at Megatron and assess the effect of his ministrations, the sight left him disturbed.

The warlord was lying perfectly still, his frame straight like a rod, optics closed and face unnaturally even. Only now did Optimus realize that he hadn't heard Megatron produce a single sound except for that one gasp; he looked almost in pain, holding back all signs of pleasure that he doubtlessly felt – Optimus sensed it in his field, read it in his port's contractions – but forbade himself to display.

"...a well-used whore?"

You are not a whore, Optimus wanted to say, *there is nothing bad about showing pleasure*, - but he was afraid that voicing that would just cause additional shame. Perhaps in this case actions would help better.

He eased back onto his haunches and crawled closer to Megatron, releasing his hips and stroking his abdominal plating softly.

"Megatron?" he called. "Look at me?"

And when those red optics focused on him Optimus smiled, retracting his own panel. His spike rose proud and crackling with charge, and Megatron licked his lips.

"Yes," he rasped, voice hoarse. "Go on."

Optimus nodded and aligned the tip with the port's wet, sopping entrance. His connector was comparatively small and kinda annoyingly jolly, bright red and blue seeming a little too spiffy in

contrast to dark grey and black of Megatron's array. But this was not a fashion show, and one didn't need a big spike to conduct a charge. Plus Optimus had learned just how many nodes were located near the port's rim. He was going to do okay... Or so he hoped. Self-service was probably very different from the real thing, and Optimus wanted to give pleasure right now, not take it...

He shook his head, chasing away all doubts. Hesitance was the last thing he needed tonight. Instead he sent Megatron an enticing smile and pushed, sinking into the slick heat.

Megatron's port offered him no resistance, and Optimus took a sharp in-vent when this heat engulfed his spike. He had to stop then – a moment to catch his breath and to let Megatron adjust. Ports were built to be very flexible, able to reconfigure according to the spike's size; Optimus supposed it was another proof that Autobots and Decepticons were originally supposed to live together. This relic of the past came in handy: in a half-klik Megatron's port cycled down, tightening the grip around him, and Optimus couldn't hold back a moan. The charge intensified instantly, running through the lubricant between the connector and the sensor nodes it connected to: an ancient way of getting rid of extra energy left over after work or battle. A stress relief mechanism turned into love confession by some – and into a means of control and humiliation by others.

Optimus made a first tentative thrust and hissed when friction set every receptor on his spike alight. Megatron gasped again and bit his lip, swallowing the remaining sounds, and Optimus slowed down.

"Please," he breathed out, regretful about their difference in height that didn't allow him to kiss Megatron's face. "Don't do this... I love seeing you in pleasure. Please don't hold back."

Megatron's gaze darted to him, hunted, but then it softened, as if the warlord came back to reality from some far-off place in his mind.

"Move," he said simply, rocking his hips in blatant invitation. Optimus hooked his arms under Megatron's slim thighs and obliged.

His movements began as irregular and shallow, but soon he found his rhythm and angle. It was much better than self-service, so much better! And when the first quiet groan escaped Megatron's lips, Optimus's head spun. He was bringing pleasure, he was doing something right! Optimus wheezed and thrust harder, encouraging those little signs of bliss, and soon had Megatron writhing and moaning under him, his port soaking with lubricants. Optimus's fans were screeching, air over his plating wavered with heat, and his hands were trembling from holding Megatron's legs in the air, but all his concentration went into one goal, a thought that thrummed in his mind: not to reach the climax first, to wring more of those delicious growls and occasional mewls from the Decepticon, to give back all the gentleness and adoration Megatron showered him with.

And when Megatron overloaded, optics flashing white and port clenching around Optimus's spike in a vicious grip, Optimus toppled after him, his straining systems roaring and shutting down all together. He blacked out for a while, blessed by the relief of a full reboot.

As he came back to his senses, he found himself lying on top of Megatron, face pressed uncomfortably into the sharp lower part of the warlord's chestplate. He stirred, raising his head, and saw that Megatron was still out. For once Optimus recovered first.

He used this rare opportunity, sighing and lying back, just enjoying the afterglow and the steady whirl of Megatron's cooling fans. If there was true peace, it was this: just resting together, basking in mutual affection.

The purr of Megatron's engine became louder, and Optimus's armored pillow shifted. Optimus glanced at the warlord again; Megatron's red optics were drowsy.

"Hey," he murmured, and Optimus took it as a signal that his brief relaxation was over. Propping himself on his elbows, Optimus tried to move away – and stopped to stare at his bared interface array.

"Huh."

"Huh indeed," Megatron agreed with a note of humor in his tone. Optimus was glad the warlord regarded the situation thus, because, well... They were locked together. Again. Only now it was Optimus that had his connector inside the other, and he wasn't sure what implications it had concerning Megatron's past experience. What if it damaged what little Optimus managed to repair?

But Megatron didn't seem to be angry or resentful for now, so maybe it wasn't that bad...

"Um..." Sitting on his heels with his spike lodged and trapped inside Megatron's port, coolant tickling oversensitized nodes, Optimus felt incredibly out of place. "I suppose we just wait?"

"I suppose." Megatron took pity on him and patted his own chest. "Come on, lie back. I doubt it's nice to sit like a statue post-overload."

"Thanks," Optimus muttered, flopping down on Megatron's chassis, the tension leaving his frame. Apparently, Megatron wasn't going to distance himself again. That was good. Besides, the warlord was right: Optimus felt particularly drained after overloading a much bigger partner, and his knees were shaking as he tried to keep his body upright. He was also too exhausted to regard the situation properly. He should probably say something to Megatron... Something important.

He closed his optics, promising himself that it was just for a klik. He wasn't giving in to the fatigue.

But the fatigue meant nothing compared to the strange longing Optimus couldn't quite name. For some reason the usual mechanic routine – cleaning up, saying goodbye, walking to his own room – seemed akin to a sacrilege. Not after what had just transpired.

"Megatron?" he whispered finally. "Can I stay for the night?"

The ghost of "*Can I recharge with you?*" rang in the emptiness.

Megatron was silent for a while, and Optimus was scared to open his optics, but when he almost gathered his resolve, the Decepticon answered:

"...Yes."

Optimus woke up wrapped in warmth and a thick blanket of a wide, potent EM field. As his higher processes activated one by one, Optimus hummed and opened his optics.

He wasn't tied to Megatron anymore, and he wasn't lying in the pose he fell asleep last night; instead he was curled up on his side, snuggling to the awfully familiar grey frame. Megatron was lying on his side too, one massive arm placed over Optimus's torso.

The warlord was deep in recharge.

Optimus blinked, the full grasp of what was going on dawning upon him. Megatron wasn't holding him down like he used to do on Quintessa; his field wasn't in distress, his battle protocols weren't on alert.

He was allowing Optimus to cuddle with him.

Optimus's throat constricted, spark skipped a beat and then throbbed in his chest, painful and sweet. Without thinking, Optimus raised his hand, but didn't dare to touch Megatron's face. This moment, this... *thing* was too frail, too wondrous to believe.

And in this very instance Optimus realized that he didn't want to escape anymore. Couldn't escape. Because if he broke this fragile trust he somehow earned, there would be no chance for peace ever again.

Because if he broke this trust, he'd hate himself for the rest of his life.

Megatron's optics lit up - gradually and lazily. As they focused on Optimus's face, they widened in surprise, and the Prime smiled.

"Good morning," he said; his chronometer told him it was an early hour of the solar cycle.

Megatron grunted an indefinite reply, too baffled to form words yet.

"Thank you," Optimus continued, "for this night. For everything. I hope... Are you alright?"

Megatron chuckled, a low, vibrating sound filled with genuine mirth which made something in Optimus's stomach flutter.

"Do you worry for me, little Autobot?" He wiggled the tip of Optimus's antenna with a fingertip. "I'm well. I suppose one might learn to appreciate that extravagant familiarity of yours."

It probably translated as "I like cuddling with you" from Decepticon.

Optimus wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. He felt too good, *this* felt too good! It couldn't last. Or could it?

"Megatron," he started, but the words froze in his vocalizer; suddenly Optimus was afraid of what he might say. He tried to form some sort of appropriate sentence. "I... I don't want to fight you. I want to fight *beside* you. Can we? Can we do it? Will you help us against the Quintessons?"

"Are you speaking as an official representative of the Autobot Commonwealth?" Megatron tried to joke, but grew serious upon seeing Optimus's face. "I must speak to my generals about it. Evaluate the odds and possible outcomes."

Optimus's spark jumped. It was a yes; cautious, but a yes!

"What about the slaves? And your promises of annihilating all Autobots?" It wasn't the best time and place to discuss political stuff, but Optimus couldn't hold back; he needed it, he had to know right now, because no matter how much he wanted this moment to last, he couldn't accept it if it was a lie...

Megatron contemplated him for a klik.

"The slaves are free to go if we return to Cybertron," he uttered at last, shrugging. "No need for them there. As for the Autobots... I make no promises." Red optics burned, challenging,

provoking. “If we are forced to fight, we will fight, Optimus Prime. If we are not, though... We shall see.”

It was better than nothing; better than anything Optimus hoped for, to be honest! And he came to know Megatron well enough to be aware that the Decepticon lord was prideful to a fault. This ambiguous phrasing was practically a peace offering.

Optimus hid his smirk by nuzzling Megatron’s chest; the warlord’s startled gasp was a nice bonus prize.

Optimus was walking to his apartment when he heard the alarm – accompanied by a distant crash, muffled by the thick metal walls of the citadel. Optimus halted, and in the next instance red light began flashing; dozens of footsteps thundered in the passageways, mechs and femmes hurrying to the balconies and checking their weaponry. There was no clue about what exactly happened – it appeared that everyone was getting their orders via the comm line.

Optimus tried to find a window to see what was going on, but a Decepticon soldier running past him pointed a gun at him.

“Optimus Prime! Go to your room immediately!”

Optimus had to obey him, but he wasn’t going to follow the order for longer than it was necessary for the soldier to vanish from sight. The Prime heard distant shooting and more crashes – the unmistakable sounds of battle – and rummaged through his room, trying to find something that could serve as a weapon. He dashed out of the apartment and headed down the corridor, plagued by the worst suspicions: images of Quintesson ships descending upon New Kaon, their spiral forms blocking the sunlight, scraplets being unleashed upon the city – when there was another sound he knew all too well: the hum of a space bridge opening.

Blue light illuminated the walls of the hallway, and when Optimus turned around, he was greeted with the last sight he expected: Bumblebee, Ratchet and Sari standing in the middle of the passage.

Optimus’s jaw dropped.

“W-what..?” He wiped his optics, but the figures of his friends didn’t vanish.

“Come, quickly!” Bumblebee grabbed Optimus’s arm and pulled him to the open vortex of the space bridge. “Omega Supreme is distracting the Cons, but he won’t last forever!”

Optimus’s legs refused to move.

“How..? What are you doing here?!”

“Duh!” Sari put her hands on her hips. “Rescuing you, of course!”

“But I don’t need a rescue!” Optimus blurted out before he could properly think of it.

His friends gawked at him like he had just grown three additional arms.

“Excuse me?” Ratchet barked. “Are you insane, kid?”

“Yes, I could ask the same question,” a familiar voice remarked behind Optimus’s back.

He spun around to see Megatron step from around a corner, twin swords in his hands. Bumblebee,

Ratchet and Sari aimed their weapons at him, Megatron snarled, crossing the blades...

And Optimus jumped in between them, hands raised and frame taut.

“*Stop!*” he yelled, and both parties indeed stopped, unwilling to hurt him by accident. “Please, just put down your weapons! Megatron, they simply came for my aid; you can’t blame them for thinking I was in danger. Ratchet, we don’t have to fight; I’m trying to make peace with the ‘cons here!”

Neither Ratchet, nor Bumblebee looked convinced.

“And you’re what, an official Autobot representative?” Ratchet snapped. Nobody among the new arrivals understood why Megatron snorted at this.

“Are you feeling well, boss bot?” Bumblebee asked with a raise of an optic ridge.

“He seems well,” Sari murmured, tilting her head. “I can’t sense anything off about him.”

“I believe you have a lot of explaining to do,” Megatron said. At least he appeared calmer now, his swords’ tips aimed at the floor. “But first tell Omega Supreme to stop thrashing my city.”

Optimus met his friends’ concerned stares and sighed, rubbing his temple. Megatron was right: he had a *long* explanation ahead of him.

Part III, Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Optimus finished the tale of his adventures (omitting, of course, some details concerning his personal relationship with Megatron), silence enveloped the dark room. They occupied one of the citadel's conference halls; Megatron forbade them all to assemble on board Omega Supreme as a measure of "national security", and, to be honest, he had a point. So now Optimus, Ratchet, Bumblebee, Sari and Arcee (who stayed within Omega during the rescue mission) were sitting on too-high stools around too-large table while Omega Supreme stood vigil outside, unnerving the populace of the city. Optimus hoped they wouldn't get too unnerved and attack the giant shipformer who gave them so much trouble during the Great War.

Sari was the first to break the spell of speechlessness.

"Man, when I see Sentinel again, I'm gonna kick his sorry ass!"

"Sari, language!" Optimus said automatically, and the girl furrowed her eyebrows.

"Oh come on, boss bot, you know Sari's right," Bumblebee argued. "That glitch-head sold you to the Quints!"

Some part of Optimus wanted to give the usual excuse of "he had to"... But for some reason he didn't want to use it anymore.

"Speaking of which, I'm surprised you weren't aware of that." Optimus surveyed his friends. "I thought it was common knowledge."

"That's the point, kid." Ratchet grimaced, like he smelled something foul. "We had no idea! Our noble Magnus, rust take his gears, didn't feel like filling us in. The last piece of information we got was a vague message from you that you were going on some long mission, and that was *weeks* ago!"

"But..." Optimus stuttered. "I wrote you all letters, yes, but I described what was going on directly. Why did you receive an edited version?"

Sari walked to him across the tabletop and patted his arm.

"Told ya, big guy. Sentinel's an *ass*."

Optimus lowered his optics. This last betrayal hurt... But not as strong as he feared. In fact, it was more like weary, repulsed disappointment.

What did he expect, really?

"But if you didn't get news about me becoming a tribute for the Quintessons... How did you know I was in trouble? And where to find me? Did somebody on Cybertron send you a new message?"

His friends exchanged meaningful looks.

"We did receive an encoded message," Ratchet said at last. "But not from Cybertron... It came from Nebulos."

It was Optimus's turn to stare at his friends in puzzlement. Why would organics from a completely uninvolved planet have information on his whereabouts? And why would they care?

"The message was originally sent from Cybertron," Arcee explained, "by someone called Ambassador Izaran. He said you should know him."

Optimus's optics widened.

"Izaran? Yes," he muttered slowly, "I know him. He was a Nebulon representative appointed to oversee Megatron's trial." He hit his fist against his palm. "He must've had some secret channel of communications with his homeworld!"

"Apparently," Ratchet agreed. "The point is, that Izaran guy got intel from Nebulos that you were seen on New Kaon, so he used his channel to contact us. We left our posts and organized this rescue. Which you say you didn't need." Ratchet frowned. "Care to elaborate why? Megatron might be civil to you (although any idea why escapes me), but from what I understood, you're still a prisoner here."

"Optimus," Arcee took over, leaning over the table and grabbing his hand. "The siege around Cybertron grows tighter. We don't get this information at the frontlines, but Izaran sent us some statistics and images of what's going on at home, and it's terrible. The refugees from the colonies are numerous, and there is not enough supplies to support them all. People are offlining from starvation, the rations are limited and most of them go to the army. Sentinel's reappearance helped to raise the spirits, but if we won't free Cybertron soon, it'll fall. The Quintessons refrain from bombing the planet, but they're ruthless otherwise, and that 'care' of theirs only frightens me more. Optimus, we need you. You must go back and help us stop the Quintessons."

Optimus could just gape at her, flabbergasted.

"That was your plan?" he asked. "You thought that I – that if I was with you, it could tip the scales?"

His friends' faces told him that it was exactly what they thought.

"By the Allspark..." Optimus managed to take his hand back from Arcee's grasp and clutched his temples. "I don't know what made you believe that, but... Ratchet!" He glared at the old mech. "You know I'm just a bot! Just *one* bot! I can't single-handedly defeat the Quints and solve all problems! And if you haven't noticed, I don't have an army to spare!"

Oh, but you do, a little voice in his head whispered.

"Aw come on," Sari put her hands on her hips. "It'd be just like back on Earth: our team against impossible odds. We won the last time, didn't we?"

"Sari, war is not a game. 'The last time' cost Prowl his life! And it worked only because we had the Allspark, your dad's inventions and some priceless intel on our side. And the Magnus Hammer! If you haven't noticed, it's back on Cybertron, along with my jetpack."

"Nah-ah-ah, here's where you're wrong!" Sari wagged her finger. "My dad made you a new jetpack! Even better than the one you lost!"

"Sari..." Optimus pinched his nasal ridge. "It's so much more complicated..."

"Does it mean that you won't come with us?" Bumblebee got tired of waiting. "That you won't help us fight for our homeworld?"

Optimus sighed, defeated.

“*Of course* I will.” He paused, the whispers rustling in his audials. “Although... Perhaps there is a better, more effective way to fight the Quintessons.”

That is, if his friends *and* Megatron would be willing to listen.

“Absolutely not!” Ratchet jumped to his feet and slammed his fists on the tabletop. Sari, Bumblebee and Arcee were just gawking at him.

“Ratchet...”

“You are not bringing Decepticons to Cybertron! To a weakened Cybertron! I don’t know what lies Megatron has been feeding you, but deception is in their very *name*! They will use you and attack the Autobots and kill or enslave us all!”

“And you prefer being killed or enslaved by Quints?!” Optimus rose from his seat too. “At least the Decepticons can be reasoned with! They are our kin, estranged, but Cybertronians like us! We can strike a deal with them, form a truce!”

“And you’re gonna what, trust Megatron with that?” Bumblebee arched an optic ridge. “Boss bot, are you feeling well?”

Optimus felt his face heat up with the rush of energon.

“Megatron can be trusted,” he said, cheeks burning. “Not always, not with everything... But there are things he honors and believes in. The same is true for the rest of Decepticons.” He raised his chin, trying to show confidence. “They are angry, and begrudged, and they fear that the Autobots would just put them in shackles again - but in the end, most of them simply want to go home. If we give them this chance, they will fight the Quints for it.”

“And then proceed to fight us!”

“Look, were you imprisoned yet?” Optimus met each of the Autobots’ gazes one by one. “You attacked their city, but have the Decepticons retaliated? No. You are free, because Megatron is ready to let me talk to you.”

“Why is that, by the way?” Bumblebee inquired, tone acidic. “Why is he suddenly so amicable with you?”

“Because...” Optimus’s voice trailed away for a second. “Because we had a lot of time to talk and understand each other’s points. Because we saved each other’s lives on Quintessa. And I’d hate to see our races go to war with each other again.”

“So what, we just lie down and invite Megatron to do as he pleases?! What about Prowl? Was his sacrifice for nothing?!”

“No.” Prowl’s name stabbed his spark like a knife. “And I know what I suggest is risky, but to stop a war that lasted for generations somebody has to make the first step. I’m sure Prowl would’ve approved of this.”

Bumblebee pushed his chair aside with a crash.

“I can’t believe you’re saying this, Optimus.” The minibot’s optics shimmered with hurt. “After all we went through, you’re using Prowl’s name to defend Megatron. This... this monster! You should get your processor checked!” Then he spun around and stormed out of the conference room.

The silence he left behind was so thick one could practically cut it.

Ratchet was the one to break it.

“Ahem. The kid has a point, by the way. Come, Prime. I should do a check-up on you to make sure you’re healthy... and weren’t hacked.”

Optimus opened his mouth to decline, but closed it after a short pondering. Maybe, if Ratchet saw that he wasn’t hacked, he’d believe Optimus.

And if Optimus really *was* hacked...

He didn’t want to think about it.

Ratchet refused to enter a Decepticon medbay, and Optimus was forbidden to enter Omega Supreme, so they compromised with Ratchet bringing most of his equipment to Optimus’s quarters and using his berth as a medical slab.

“Well, according to the stats, there is no sign of hacking or brainwashing,” Ratchet said, turning off the brain scanner and activating the ordinary one. “I don’t know whether I should feel relieved or concerned. What is this Decepticon-loving epidemic? First Sentinel brings home a Decepticon femme, now you’re planning on bringing home *Megatron* of all people...”

Optimus blinked.

“What Decepticon femme? I heard that he brought home the Jettwins...”

“Ah, yes, the kids,” Ratchet couldn’t hide a smile. “Who knew Sentinel was actually able to do anything decent? But there is also that female Starscream clone, remember her? Izaran reported that she appeared with the twins and now walks around Iacon, criticizing Sentinel’s decisions.” He chuckled. “Well, somebody’s gotta do it. Anyway, your systems seem to be performing at maximum levels... Oh.” He stiffened, the scanner’s ray fixed on Optimus’s pelvic area. “Prime...” The old medic raised widened optics at him. “Your port seal is gone.”

Optimus coughed and squirmed, looking everywhere except at Ratchet’s face.

“Mmm... Yeah. I know that,” he mumbled.

“Prime!” Ratchet closed the scanner and sat down on the side of the berth. “Prime, did they... force you? Did they...”

“No,” Optimus cut in, still unable to meet the medic’s gaze. “No, Ratchet, nobody forced me. I’m fine. I gave my seal willingly.”

Ratchet was left speechless for a while.

“Optimus,” he started again, his hoarse voice almost pleading, “if they pushed you, or guilt-tripped you into giving permission, it still doesn’t make it consensual. If...”

“Oh for spark’s sake!” Optimus suppressed the urge to hide the blazing hot tips of his antennas.

“Nobody guilt-tripped me! I ‘faced because I wanted to, okay?”

“It was Megatron, wasn’t it?” Ratchet’s optics grew icy. “That’s why you’re defending him so much. By the Allspark...” He gritted his dental plates. “Optimus, how could you?”

Something boiled hot and vicious in the Prime’s chest. He was so tired of it! Of the suspicions, of unbelieving gasps and horrified whispers.

“You sound like you’d prefer if I was taken by force!” he blurted out, clenching his fists.

Ratchet’s hurt expression sobered him up, but it was too late. The old medic pursed his lips and collected his tools.

“I’m not your enemy, Optimus,” he said as he stopped before the exit. “But perhaps you can’t tell enemies from friends anymore.”

With that said he was gone.

Optimus was sitting on the windowsill on the upper floor of the citadel, where he talked to Megatron only a solar cycle before (a solar cycle! And it felt like a whole century separated him from that evening). Outside the immense form of Omega Supreme towered over the roofs of the city, but Optimus’s seat still was higher than the shipformer’s head. There, behind Omega’s impenetrable armor, Optimus’s friends resided; they poignantly refused to speak with him, but they also didn’t leave.

Maybe they should. Who knows how long Megatron’s hospitality was going to last?

Optimus pulled his knees closer to his chest and sighed. He was at loss, and the worst thing was that Cybertron’s fate bothered him the least. What currently plagued his mind was the rift between the two parts of his life - parts that Optimus wasn’t even aware existed! He had always considered himself a loyal Autobot, but, apparently, in his friends’ eyes he didn’t act like one anymore.

He had a different loyalty now; not replacing, but adding to his old one and contradicting it.

It should’ve terrified him, but it didn’t.

Soft buzz of small thrusters invaded his thoughts, and Optimus turned away from the window to see Sari hovering beside him on her jetpack.

“Hey, big guy,” she said, landing on the broad windowsill. “Am I intruding?”

Optimus shook his head.

“No. I’m glad to see you, Sari. I guess I never greeted you properly, but I *did* miss you a lot.”

“Me too,” Sari didn’t retract her mask – New Kaon’s atmosphere was hardly suitable for humans, even technorganic ones – but Optimus could *sense* her smiling in return. “I was so worried when I heard about you being shipped to the Quints! We all worried.” She eagerly stepped on the offered palm and allowed Optimus to put her on his bent knee.

Optimus cast an automatic glance at Omega Supreme, and Sari placed a hand on his finger.

“We all worried for you, and we still do. Even while Bumblebee is pacing around Omega’s bridge and Ratchet snaps at him every five minutes. They are angry because they care.”

“I suppose so,” Optimus ex-vented loudly, hot air hissing as it went through his grilles. “Look, I don’t want to sound ungrateful. I’m very happy to see you all, and I can’t express how much it means to me that you came to my rescue. But I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Megatron: I have some principles that I’m not betraying. Freedom is the right of all sentient beings, organic and robotic, Autobot and Decepticon. I’m not going to let Decepticons take over Cybertron and wipe out my kin, but I’m not going to reject them by default, just for being Decepticons. And when it comes to the safety of my homeworld, I do believe that old conflict should be put to rest...”

“I agree with you, big guy,” Sari squeezed her tiny fingers, and Optimus stopped in the middle of his tirade.

“Look,” the girl sat down on his knee. “I’m only part Cybertronian, and I haven’t seen the damage the Great War did to your planet. What I know of the ‘cons, I know from Earth. And I know *you*, Optimus; I trust you. You looked past humans’ organic nature and saw lives worth of protection, despite your people’s usual distaste for us. You looked past your team’s ‘lowly repair-bot’ status and saw friends and bots capable of great things, and you weren’t wrong. So I’m gonna take the leap of faith here and trust you on the whole Decepticon business, even though I really wanna punch Megatron in his face for all the things he’d done to my dad and my planet. The other guys just need more time. They are still here, after all.” She winked, and Optimus couldn’t help but smile despite himself.

“How did you get here, anyway?” he asked, moving the conversation into a more neutral direction. He didn’t want to get all mushy. “And how did you find me?”

“Well, that Izaran dude sent us quite a lot of info regarding your disappearance, along with some facts about the Decepticons’ escape from – or rather, *with* Trypticon. He wrote that they stole a plasma dynamic thruster in order to teleport the fortress away from Cybertron, so we figured out that the thruster should be somewhere on New Kaon, as should you. And we have a space bridge on Earth, remember?”

“And Earth wasn’t under Quintesson attack...” Optimus murmured. “I wonder why. It wasn’t that well-protected – I’m sorry, Sari, but you and Bumblebee aren’t much - and the space bridge there is as good as any other...”

“No idea.” Sari shrugged. “Anyway, Ratchet and Arcee talked Omega Supreme into leaving his post, we rendezvoused on Earth and then aimed the space bridge at New Kaon. There was exactly one source of transwarp energy here – which, I suppose, is the plasma dynamic thruster – so we leeches onto its charge. Omega transwarped here using his own drive to distract the ‘cons, and then we transwarped here through the space bridge. It could pinpoint the location of the stolen thruster only approximately, so we found ourselves in some random room, but I “talked” to one of the consoles, and it showed me where to find you. You have a locator beacon inside you, do you know that?”

“Yeah,” Optimus mumbled, thanking the Allspark that he didn’t alter the beacon’s signal that day. “I have to admit: this was a rather solid plan.”

“Damn right it was!” Sari struck a victorious pose. “We really wanted to get you back, big guy. We thought you were being reprogrammed or taken apart or something even worse...”

Her monologue was interrupted by Omega’s rumbling bass; even the windows’ armored glass couldn’t muffle his voice.

“Intruder alert! Autobots in danger!”

Optimus and Sari dashed to the nearest balcony.

When Optimus bent over the fence he was prepared for anything: an army of Seekers attacking Omega Supreme, Megatron trying to hack him once more, Omega stomping on someone's house – but what he saw was, simply put, underwhelming: only one screeching and cussing figure held firmly in Omega's giant palm.

Optimus couldn't hold back a short sigh of relief.

"Omega! Let him go! He's not an enemy."

The shipformer had to turn his entire massive frame to be able to look at Optimus.

"Decepticons... are enemies. This one... approached."

"I was looking for you! Tell him, Optimus Prime!" Scratch yelled, writhing in Omega's grasp.

"He's a friend, Omega." Optimus stepped on the fence and jumped on the shipformer's outstretched other palm. In the moments like this he really missed his jetpack. "Put him down, he won't do any harm."

"All Decepticons... mean harm." Omega seemed perplexed, but obeyed nevertheless. Scratch fluffed his plating like an angry turbofox as soon as Omega placed him and Optimus on the ground.

"Keep that overgrown oaf in check," the Decepticon hissed, desperately trying to stop his knees from shaking and failing miserably.

Omega Supreme's hatch opened, and Ratchet, Arcee and Bumblebee joined the commotion, seemingly forgetting about their grudge for a while.

"What's with the 'con?" Bumblebee's demonstratively aggressive posture resembled Scratch's so much Optimus barely held back a giggle.

"This is Scratch," he said instead. "He's the librarian at the local archive."

"A Decepticon who does a civilian's job?" Arcee tilted her head. "That's unusual."

"Yeah, thanks for rubbing it in my face," Scratch grunted. "I was looking for you, Optimus Prime," he repeated, his tone much softer. "Are you... Are you really leaving?" His optics were sad. "I sorta hoped you'd stay forever..."

Out of the corner of his optic Optimus saw Ratchet, Sari, Bumblebee and Arcee exchange confused looks, but then his attention turned to the Decepticon who was eyeing him with unspoken plea.

"I'm sorry, Scratch. I wish I didn't have to leave forever, but Cybertron is in danger. I hope there will be a way for us to see each other again."

"Yeah." Judging by Scratch's forlorn expression, he didn't believe in it. "But that's dumb... You Autobots get to go fight for Cybertron, and we warbuilds stay here."

"I thought you were a librarian," Ratchet commented from his spot. Scratch cast a nasty glare at him.

"I'm still a warbuild!" he hissed. "And those slaggin' squids better get their tentacles *off* my home!" He peeked at Optimus again. "I'm glad you go to punch those fraggers... I just, I dunno, wish you didn't have to leave."

Something stirred in Optimus spark – something he didn't dare to name yet but that was too much akin to hope.

“You could go with us,” he suggested, careful not to sound too assuming. “And fight for Cybertron, if you want...”

“Recruiting my soldiers, Optimus?”

Optimus nearly yelped at the sound of Megatron's voice. Scratch, however, did yelp and attempted to hide behind Optimus's much smaller frame.

“I'm... No. Sorry.” Optimus could sense his friends tensing behind him.

“And do you want to go fight for Cybertron, mm..?”

“Scratch,” the librarian squeaked. “I, um, I...” His EM field washed over Optimus in waves of fear, and it was fear that made him be truthful. Lying to Megatron's face was ill-advised. “I would like to save Cybertron from the Quints,” he mumbled at last.

“I see.” Megatron nodded. “Good.”

This time Optimus didn't manage to hide a surprised cry.

“Good?” He repeated, afraid to believe what he was hearing.

“Yes.” Megatron crossed his arms, meeting Optimus's gaze head-on. “I made up my mind. We will help you,” the corners of his lips twitched in a grimace, “in return for the right to populate Cybertron again, free and independent.”

Optimus's spark was pounding in his chest so hard its casing hurt.

“Yes,” he wheezed, “yes.”

“I'm making this treaty with you, Optimus Prime.” Megatron's red optics were fierce. “Not with your High Command; yet I still expect it to be honored by all Autobots. How you manage it is your concern, but know that we shall not accept an unequal truce. My people will not bear slave coding like *him*.” He pointed at Omega Supreme.

“I... do not understand,” the shipformer rumbled above their heads. Ratchet and Arcee hurried to pat his foot.

“It's okay, old friend,” Ratchet cooed. “I'll explain it later.” Arcee sent an indignant glare in Megatron's direction, but the warlord ignored her.

“If the High Command tries to reprogram any Decepticons, I will stand by your side, Megatron,” Optimus stated calmly. “But I demand the same treatment from you: you shall not oppress or enslave other sentient beings, Cybertronian or not.”

Megatron held his gaze for a while, and then inclined his head.

“Agreed.” He glanced at the librarian. “Go check your weapons, Scratch. We're going home.”

This was the second time Optimus was on a strategy meeting in New Kaon, but this time he felt much more confident. And the participants were more benevolent to him: his entire team was

present, including Sari, who refused to stay behind. Ratchet and Arcee were glaring at Shockwave, not caring to conceal their hate, and the former double agent returned the glares tenfold, despite only having one optic sensor.

At least Strika appeared to be less hostile. She even gave Optimus an appreciative pat on back before the meeting started, but the other Autobots still got on her nerves.

“According to our new... allies’ information,” she visibly had to force herself to say that, “the siege around Cybertron grows more severe, with more ships arriving from the already overrun sectors. Only three space bridges are still standing, including the one on Earth, and the network is under strict control, allowing just few authorized jumps. The Quintessons seem to want to get Cybertron intact, but we’re not sure how they’ll react if attacked. Apart from the hunter net they have their fleet surrounding the planet, including the flagship,” she pointed to the dot on the holographic map. “And I don’t believe they aren’t expecting an attack,” she finished, crossing her arms. “Any direct offence would be extremely dangerous. My lord,” she addressed Megatron directly, “I believe that our army won’t be able to take on the Quintessons, even if the Autobot forces join us. The only way to defeat them is to destroy all their ships quickly and unexpectedly, but there is no weapon, Autobot or Decepticon, that can do it.”

The conference room immersed in silence. But then a low hum came from Megatron’s side.

“Actually...” he paused, as if doubting whether he should continue, but finally spoke again: “Perhaps there is.”

All optics were on him now, waiting for explanation; some surprised, some dubious.

“Long ago, when I was a miner,” Megatron began, “I was caught in a cave-in. The floor of the tunnel shattered, and I fell into a ravine. I survived the fall, but found myself deep down in Cybertron’s Underworld.”

Somebody gasped.

“But... They say that nobody can get out of the Underworld alive!” Arcee exclaimed.

Megatron didn’t even spare her a glance.

“It wasn’t particularly nightmarish – just a dark maze of tunnels and halls of unknown origin. I spent many days there, trying to find the way to the surface, but ended up even deeper than when I started. And there I found something.” Megatron’s optics focused again, locking on the holographic replica of Cybertron. “There were engines. Immense flight engines – so big one could fit an arena in one thruster - and something that resembled a weapon system.”

“So that’s it,” Ratchet breathed out. “That’s where you got that insane idea of yours – to rebuild Cybertron into a giant warship! We all thought you were crazy!”

“I don’t need to rebuild anything.” Megatron’s optics narrowed as he scrutinized the old medic. “Because Cybertron *is* a giant warship. I only need to transform it.”

“Even then, what would it give you? What kind of plan is it – to make your own planet into a tool of conquest?!”

“It would give my people a purpose!” Megatron growled, and the Autobots instinctively shifted away from him. “Peacetime was the reason your ancestors used to subjugate and dismiss us, Autobot; we weren’t needed anymore, and you came up with a lot of creative ways to get rid of us. We were the tools you no longer needed, that you found unappealing, and if the only way for my

people to live is perpetual war – then I shall give them war!”

Ratchet didn’t answer; he was just standing there, silent, until finally Optimus could take it no more.

“Megatron.” He placed a hand on the warlord’s elbow, painfully aware of his friends’ stares but choosing not to acknowledge them for the moment. “Do you still think that? That permanent war is the only way?”

Megatron turned his heavy gaze to him.

“Megazarak tried peace with the Autobots,” he uttered. “We ended up in flight locks.”

“You are not Megazarak,” Optimus said firmly. “And we shall try again.”

Strika coughed, displeased by the distraction from the topic.

“Why didn’t you tell us about your find before?” She sounded fairly hurt.

“Because I didn’t want this secret to fall into wrong hands. Besides, I never managed to activate those systems.” Megatron tapped his fingertips against the tabletop in thought. “Judging by its size, one blast from that weapon could scatter the Quintesson fleet for good.”

“Awesome,” Strika commented dryly. “But, as you said, we have no way of activating it.”

“Ahem!” Sari flew from her seat on Bumblebee’s shoulder and landed on the table. “I think you’re forgetting someone! I can talk to tech, Cybertronian or Earthen, and learn how it works just by touching it. If I touch that weapon of yours...”

“No!” Optimus gawked at her, appalled. “Sari, you are not travelling to the Underworld! It’s too...”

“Dangerous? Blah-blah-blah!” The girl crossed her arms. “Come on, Optimus, we had this conversation before! I can take care of myself. Besides – you saved my planet; now I want to help you save yours.”

Optimus looked over the assembled company, feeling hunted – but everyone seemed to be waiting for his decision.

And he surrendered.

“Fine. You can go, but only if you stay close to me.” Good thing that he had a new jetpack now. “Still, it all depends on whether or not this mission is even possible.” Optimus turned to the warlord. “Megatron, you said you stumbled upon this weapon system in the Underworld long ago. Can you still find a way to it?”

Megatron allowed himself the last moment of contemplation; when he finally spoke, a faint grin was forming on his lips.

“Yes.”

I believe this chapter is the second to last. If everything goes as planned, this story is nearing its end. :)

(Unless the next chapter grows so much I'll have to separate it in two... =_=)

Part III, Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Okay, so my predictions were right, and this chapter grew so much I had to split it in two. It's the next chapter that will be the last. Sorry for inconvenience!

The Decepticons, for all their faults, were truly made to wage war in the most effective way: when Megatron called for total mobilization, they obeyed instantly, and the entirety of New Kaon turned into one colossal military camp. New squads were arriving from other Decepticon worlds every day, and the sky was crisscrossed by contrails and filled with sonic booms of flight engines. Optimus wasn't sure how he felt about that; he didn't realize just how many people Megatron had under his command, and now that he saw the full force of the great army which once struck fear into the sparks of all Autobots, he started having doubts about his decision. It was too late to turn back anyway, so he kept his worries to himself.

The general mood, at least, seemed to be exhilarated: the Decepticons were excited about taking back their home, and their open hatred of Quintessons gave Optimus a little hope that they would forget about the ancient feud with the Autobots for a while.

Not everyone was happy with the future campaign, though.

"Hey, you! Autobot!"

Optimus stopped in the middle of the street, recognizing the voice. Oh, slag, not them again.

"Hey! Show some respect to the boss!" A large hand grabbed his shoulder and turned him around to stare right in the snarling face of Wildrider – and behind him the rest of the Stunticons.

"Good day to you too," Optimus grumbled, not bothering to hide his frustration. He had no time for bullies. Out of a corner of his eye he could see passerby slowing down to watch the upcoming show, and not in all optics the curiosity was friendly.

"You walk around our city all high and mighty, like you own it." Motormaster stepped forward, pushing Wildrider aside. "You should know your place, Autobot."

"Didn't you have enough the last time, Motormaster?" Optimus made sure to speak loudly and heard some 'cons in the crowd snicker; they proceeded to share the details of Optimus's last encounter with Motormaster with their recently arrived colleagues, earning more snickers. Decepticons society was cruel and unforgiving to its own members, and Optimus could play it to his advantage.

Motormaster growled, looming over Optimus.

"Oh, but this time your tricks won't work, Autobot scum. You need to be taught a lesson, so that everyone can see what a load of slag this entire plan is..."

Optimus didn't even have time to react, because an ear-shattering roar rolled over the square, and suddenly Motormaster was flung across it as a heavy claw-fist collided with his head.

“How dare you berate the plan of great and glorious Lord Megatron!?”

Optimus could just blink as Lugnut rose to his full height, the Stunticons scattering away before him. Motormaster was trying to get back on his feet, shaking his head after the impact.

“Our wise and noble leader will bring us back to Cybertron, as he promised, and we’ll crush the insolent invaders into dust! All who doubt that are traitors!” Lugnut’s main optic zoomed in on Motormaster. “I should teach you proper respect!”

Motormaster finally scrambled to his feet; his shoulders were dropped in a show of submission, although he cast a furious glare at Optimus.

“Of course,” he wheezed, his vocalizer clearly damaged. “Forgive me, officer. I was... blinded by my distaste for Autobot oppressors.”

But Lugnut, in his loyal zeal, didn’t fall into the obvious trap. Instead he nodded, pleased with the answer.

“Keep that distaste, but don’t let it blind you. Lord Megatron in his infinite wisdom always manages to find Autobots who are ready to listen to him. If you can’t tell friend from foe on your own, you should rely on his judgement.”

Somebody in the crowd snorted.

“Having your intellect insulted by Lugnut, way to go, Motormaster!”

The atmosphere changed; no one appeared to be ready to come to the Stunticons’ aid, and Optimus allowed his aching and rigid joints to relax a little.

“Thank you, Lugnut,” he said quietly as they left the square.

“No need to thank me, Optimus Prime. I know I stole a chance of a victorious battle from you, but I can’t stand fools talking slag about Lord Megatron’s glorious decisions.”

“It’s, um, okay.” Optimus wasn’t even surprised anymore. “I’m glad to have a chance to fight side-by-side with you in the nearest future,” he added after a short pondering.

“I would be honored, Optimus Prime.” Lugnut gave him a ceremonious bow.

They parted ways, and soon Optimus reached his original destination: the place where Omega Supreme was stationed. And here he was greeted with the most curious sight.

Omega had his open palm near his face, and Scratch was sitting on said palm, gesturing wildly. He was practically yelling, so that every word could be heard from the ground, and Omega’s booming voice thundered all over the place.

“No, you don’t understand! They created you as a war machine, and they installed the slave coding on you so that you never go out of their control!”

“I... want to protect the Autobots.” Omega seemed perplexed... if a little bit alarmed.

“That’s because they left you no choice! You said it yourself, you were supposed to be your master’s servant!”

“Ratchet... is a friend. He was always kind to me.”

“Well you’re lucky! But it doesn’t change the fact that you are made to be dependent on him!”

There was an indistinct sound from Optimus’s left, and then he spotted Ratchet standing there, a corner of a warehouse hiding him from Omega’s view.

“Your librarian pal is quite the agitator,” he grumbled, crossing his arms. Yet there was no true ire in his voice; in fact, Ratchet looked nearly... resigned.

“Are you okay?” Optimus walked to him, but didn’t have courage to pat Ratchet’s shoulder as he wanted.

“What do you think?” the old medic spat. “He’s right, you know. That ‘con. The fact that I tried to be Omega’s friend doesn’t change the fact that I was made his master, one who should’ve sent him – barely a sparkling, deliberately created with limited CPU capacity! – to kill and destroy and sacrifice himself for the Autobot cause. I never talked about this with Omega, never told him what fate he was subjected to; I couldn’t tell him! But you know what? He deserves to know. And if he doesn’t want to speak to me after that... I’ll understand.”

“Nonsense.” This time, Optimus did place a hand on Ratchet’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go talk to Omega instead of presuming stuff? You don’t want Scratch to agitate him into becoming a Decepticon, do you?” He smiled, and finally earned a ghost of a smirk in return.

“Fine,” Ratchet sighed, “I’ll go.” He paused, looking away. “And I, erm... wanted to say sorry. For mistrusting you. Perhaps you’re right, and this *is* a chance for peace. Allspark knows, the old ways brought no good for any of us. Perhaps it’s time to try something new.”

They gathered up in the conference room for the last strategy meeting: Megatron and his top officers, Optimus and his Autobots, and – to Optimus’s surprise – Leader-1, the Mini-Con supervisor.

“Alright, let’s sum it up.” Megatron switched on the holomap of Cybertron’s system. “We have two objectives. First, we need to get to the planet’s core and activate the weapon system; I believe that it will require some transformation sequences or changes on the surface – in any case, it’ll be visible from the orbit. Therefore, our second objective is to keep Quintesson fleet busy, so that they are unable to bomb Cybertron or react in any other way. For the first objective, there will be a small team of myself, Optimus Prime and Sari Sumdac. We’ll need to get to the surface without alerting the hunter net; any suggestions how?”

“Logically, the safest way would be through a space bridge.” Strika cast a meaningful glance at the Autobots.

“It would’ve been, if the space bridge network wasn’t under strict control!” Ratchet retorted. “They block any unauthorized attempt to transwarp to the planet. No one can bypass that block.”

“Ahem!” Bumblebee leaned on the back of his seat, a cocky grin on his lips. “You’re forgetting something, or rather *someone*. No one can pass the space bridge block... except for the best space bridge technician in the Commonwealth?”

“Bulkhead!” Optimus jumped on his feet. “Bumblebee, you’re a genius! Bulkhead is on Cybertron! Sentinel made him oversee the energon farms, so he must still be there! Ratchet, send a message to Izaran: we need Bulkhead to activate a space bridge for us at a certain time. We’ll use the plasma

dynamic thruster to open the wormhole, and Bulkhead will provide the exit point.”

“Should I tell him it’s for you, Sari and *Megatron*?” Ratchet barked, but then his voice softened. “Alright, don’t worry. I’ll send the message and inform you of the answer.”

“Now that this is taken care of,” Megatron’s voice was so polite one could practically sense the venom in it, “let’s talk about the second objective. Strika, Scrash, are your troops ready?”

“Yes, my lord,” the two answered in unison, but then the old Air Commander continued: “However, I must warn you that against such a powerful enemy as the Quintesson fleet we shall need the element of surprise, which means that the best way to attack is to appear at Cybertron’s orbit suddenly and in full force. Which, once again, is possible only with the help of a space bridge.”

“Good that we have the plasma dynamic thruster, then.”

“But, Megatron,” Arcee even raised her hand like a proper schoolgirl, her anxiety at speaking against the Decepticon lord not preventing her from asking, “a plasma dynamic thruster will only transport the object or a person it’s attached to. There is no way it could transport an army.”

This time Megatron’s smirk held no venom. He glanced at Leader-1, who beeped solemnly, then looked back at Arcee.

“And this, little Autobot, is where you’re wrong.”

They all jolted when the floor beneath their feet began shaking; a low, barely registerable rumble rolled through the building, making Optimus’s insides vibrate. The Autobots all rose from their seats, panic written upon their faces, but the Decepticons shared the same smug expression, and Optimus raised his voice.

“Megatron! What’s going on?”

“Come to the balcony,” Megatron made an inviting gesture, “and see for yourself.”

They all rushed to the balcony door, wincing as they went out into the open terrace, for here the rumbling was even more deafening. But all discomfort was forgotten the moment they laid optics on a sight nobody among the Autobots could even imagine.

The enormous looming form of Trypticon was slowly rising into the air, white-blue fire blazing out of the monumental nozzles on the underside of the fortress.

Unable – and not caring – to conceal his shock, Optimus spun around to look at Megatron, who strolled onto the balcony behind them.

“Trypticon can *fly*!?”

“I told you many days ago, Optimus Prime,” Megatron half-shut his optics, basking in the effect, “Trypticon had always been and would always remain my fortress; you Autobots might’ve used it, but you’ve never learned all its secrets.”

“Besides,” Strika added, appearing at Megatron’s shoulder, “a good strategist never plays all their trump cards in one go.”

Optimus stared at Leader-1, who followed Megatron to the balcony and stopped at his feet.

“I thought Mini-Cons were neutral! Why didn’t you tell us Trypticon could fly!?”

Leader-1’s impassive yellow optics blinked.

{ Autobots: did not ask. }

Optimus didn’t have anything to say to that. Instead, he turned his attention back to Trypticon and saw it rise faster and faster, transforming as it left the ground far behind.

“It’s a spaceship!” Sari voiced his friends’ thoughts. “A giant spaceship!”

{ Trypticon: home of Mini-Cons. Many stellar cycles ago Mini-Cons flew from Luna-1 to Cybertron; warbuilds asked for Trypticon, Mini-Cons agreed. } Leader-1 gave a series of indecipherable beeps. { Autobots won the war, Autobots asked for Trypticon, Mini-Cons agreed. Mini-Cons obey the law; Mini-Cons watch over Trypticon. }

“Trypticon and its inhabitants, be it prisoners or conquerors,” Megatron translated. “And now Trypticon will take us all back to Cybertron.”

{ Mini-Cons: desire that, } Leader-1 agreed.

The message from Bulkhead arrived through Nebulos, as before, - and, to everyone’s relief, it was positive. Bulkhead promised them a date and time when he could deactivate the space bridge block – “with the Ambassador’s help”, as he wrote. He had reasonable doubts regarding cooperation with Decepticons, but didn’t argue with Optimus’s decision – something that the Prime feared simple but honest Bulkhead might do.

Sadly, the tone in which Bulkhead wrote was far from simple; it appeared that the war took its toll on the once-faithful Autobot. *Energion farms are practically drained, he wrote in his letter, and no matter what slag Sentinel says in his propaganda videos, there is not enough fuel to feed everyone. I had to open the military storages, and Sentinel would’ve prosecuted me, if the very soldiers who guarded it didn’t support me. I hope you get rid of the Quints quick, because we’re on the verge of mutiny here. I’m afraid some folk would rather welcome the Decepticons than starve. The Jettwins and the female clone, Slipstream, made a good impression, but I’m not sure about the whole ‘con business. Still, you’re the boss, so I’m trusting you.*

Optimus put the datapad away with a heavy spark. His friends, who listened to him reading the letter aloud, kept the grave silence.

“Well,” Ratchet uttered at last, “it would seem we have no choice. It’s sink or swim – and I pray, kid, that you were right about Megatron and his intentions.”

This didn’t lift the weight from Optimus’s spark at all.

The evening before the attack the tension rose so much Sari could sense it crackling in the bots’ EM fields. She still didn’t fully understand how her Cybertronian senses worked, but she was able to interpret the flow of data that went to her... brain? CPU? Sari preferred the human term, just to be safe.

Yet for now the complications of her own body and origins didn’t trouble her as much as Optimus’s condition did. The Prime tried to look confident and reassuring, but Sari didn’t have to

read his EM field to figure out that her friend was distressed. And stressed. He walked out of Omega Supreme alone, and Sari didn't catch him in time.

She flew over Omega's head, but the gallery where she found Optimus the last time was empty.

"Hi, Scratch!" She approached the green shape of the Decepticon, who was lounging on Omega Supreme's shoulder. "Have you seen Optimus? Any idea where he could be?"

The librarian rubbed his nasal ridge.

"He went to the command center. If the rumors are anything to go by, you might find him in Megatron's personal quarters." He sniggered, and Sari frowned under her facemask. She didn't get this creepy hint, but she wasn't going to betray her ignorance in front of this guy.

"Why don't you go home? You're hanging around Omega too much, don't you think?"

"Nah. I like it here." Scratch grinned and made a rude gesture to some Seeker who had just flown overhead. "People are actually showing me some *respect*; I'd like to see them try to pick fights with a mech who's pals with Omega fraggin' Supreme."

"Does he bother you, Omega?" Sari eyed the shipformer.

"No," he rumbled. "Scratch is a friend. We talk." He paused. "Ratchet allows this," he added a bit guiltily, and Scratch sat up, flaring his plates.

"I told you, big guy, you don't *have to* explain whom you're talking to! You're slaggin' Omega Supreme, nobody should dare to forbid you anything!"

The Decepticon's shrill voice made Sari's ears ring, and she decided to leave the two to their debates. She spun in the air and headed to the citadel instead, opening the map of the building she downloaded from the console during their rescue mission.

She was going to follow Scratch's advice, but she found Optimus even before she reached Megatron's quarters. In fact, she found both him and Megatron, standing in the hallway that led to said quarters. Sari heard their voices before she made the last turn, and something in their intonations made her stop at the corner.

"...were awfully quiet today, Optimus." That was Megatron, and he sounded... *gentle*?

Sari heard the Prime sigh.

"You can't blame me. We're moving out tomorrow and... Everything depends on whether our plan works. Whether our alliance works."

"And you feel like Cybertron's fate rests on your shoulders."

"I..." Optimus stuttered. "How do you know?"

"I came to know you very well, Optimus Prime." Megatron's tone was still soft, despite the potentially threatening idea behind his sentence. "Listen; what I say now might seem cynical or cruel to you, but if we fail... It's not the end of the universe. It's painful, it's devastating, it will leave you at a disadvantage, countless lives and resources would be lost, and you won't be able to escape the weight of it – but it will pass, and there will be another day. Lick your wounds, grit your dental plates, rise up and think of another plan. As long as you live, there will be another battle to fight. And if you die, there will be others who will continue what you began. Perhaps not right

away, but they will come. In the grand perspective, one person cannot save or ruin everything – and cannot be responsible for everything. Such is the way this universe works.”

Optimus was silent for a while.

“Is that... how you endured all these millions of years? Losing a war, living in exile, having the Allspark snatched right out of your hands, being imprisoned... Yet you kept going. Is that how?”

But Megatron didn’t answer.

“Go back to your friends, Optimus. No need to nurture their doubts by spending the night before the battle with your worst enemy.” He chuckled. “It’s bad for morale.”

“What about my morale?” What was it with Optimus’s voice? Sari raised her eyebrows; was he... *pouting*?

Megatron chuckled again.

“Alright, alright, here’s some morale boosting for you.” There was a low clang of plating against plating, Optimus let out a little gasp – and then his jetpack roared to life, and Sari couldn’t make out any distinct sounds apart from some muffled ex-vents.

Curious and more than a little worried, she flew to the wall and carefully peeked around the corner.

Optimus hovered in the air – but maybe he didn’t really need his jetpack, because Megatron’s arm was holding him, pressing him to the warlord’s broad chest. Another large black palm was cupping his head, but Optimus didn’t seem to mind: his arms were wrapped around Megatron’s neck, optics shut, and...

And they were kissing.

Sari could only stare, unable to move, unable to *think*, and – how was it even possible!? Her first instinct was to fly to them, to tear Optimus out of the Decepticon’s claws, because certainly Optimus didn’t want it – but then Optimus moaned and opened his mouth, and Sari saw a flick of wet, agile glossa, a graze of fangs against soft lips...

And Sari definitely shouldn’t be watching this!

She moved back behind the corner, her chest heaving and blood thrumming in her ears. Scratch’s raunchy hints suddenly became very, very clear. Oh god... Oh god, it couldn’t be that Optimus, her friend, her playmate, was... was...

Robots didn’t have sex! ...Right?

Well, they weren’t having sex (Sari mentally slapped herself). They were just kissing. There was nothing weird with kissing. Except that it was Megatron and Optimus. Who, apparently, were the center of New Kaon’s celebrity gossips.

And, according to the sounds, who had just stopped kissing and were saying their goodbyes.

Biting her lip, Sari flew to the ceiling and pressed her little body to one of the balks, hoping that the constant darkness of Decepticon hallways will conceal her from Optimus’s wandering gaze. Fortunately, it worked: Optimus walked below her without noticing the girl, but she caught a glimpse of a smile on his face – a smile that looked more relaxed than any expression in the last several days.

Sari caught up with Megatron before the door to his quarters, her little jetpack roaring angrily.

“Hey! Hey, stop right here! We need to talk.” The girl hovered in front of the warlord’s face, arms crossed and face gloomy.

Megatron graciously complied, an amused smirk blooming on his lips.

“Yes, child?”

“Don’t ‘child’ me.” Sari frowned, but her posture appeared somehow... embarrassed? “Look, I trust Optimus, and he seems to trust you, so I’m ready to give you a chance. But I want to warn you: I have the power of the Allspark in me, and if you end up screwing Optimus over, I will make your life a living hell! Got it?”

Megatron chuckled.

“Got it. So much rage in such a little creature.”

“You haven’t seen real rage yet.” Sari pointed a finger at him. “I haven’t forgotten how you held my dad hostage!”

Megatron’s smirk became dangerous.

“Your father, child, eviscerated my head to steal Cybertronian technology, and even after he learned of my sentience, he continued to use my severed hand for a *chair*. So forgive me for not having fond feelings for Isaac Sumdac.”

“Well I’m not happy about having parts of *you* in my body, thank you very much!” Sari made a barfing sound. “Sari has two daddies, and one of them is an evil alien overlord. Ew!”

Megatron cringed.

“Please don’t apply your organic breeding terms to me.”

“Sensitive, are we?” Sari put her hands on her hips. “Anyway, I didn’t come here to discuss my father. What I meant to say is – don’t you dare to hurt Optimus. I’m watching you!”

“Sure, sure.” Megatron waved his hand and grinned as he watched the girl fly away. Optimus found friends in the weirdest places, but so far Isaac Sumdac’s daughter had been one of the most fascinating.

He wondered briefly why her tiny face radiated an unusual amount of heat.

Part III, Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sentinel woke up from the sound of alarm – a very specific alarm that he, somehow, forgot about during the last months.

It was the “Decepticon attack” signal.

Before his processor even finished booting, Sentinel was already running to the command post.

He stormed into the room right in time to see the enormous form of Trypticon unfolding its battle decks and preparing the cannon turrets. Sentinel actually had to stop and wipe his optic lenses to believe what he was seeing. Trypticon looked... different. Less like a fortress and more like a spaceship, yet still very recognizable.

“Did any of you know Trypticon could do this?!” he exclaimed, but the rest of the Autobots who watched the monitors just shook their heads absent-mindedly.

“They transwarped here three kliks earlier,” one of the bots behind the console said. “Using the stolen plasma dynamic thruster, without a doubt. We’re screwed, sir,” the bot finished as Trypticon’s hatches opened and numerous figures emerged from it, like insects from a rattled hive: Seekers, heavy fighters, shuttles – dozens and dozens of them, forming squadrons and heading straight to Cybertron...

Only that they stopped halfway and dispersed between the bizarre corkscrew shapes of Quintesson ships. The dark of the outer space was torn by multicolored flashes of laser fire – none of it aimed at the Autobot ships or the planet.

The order to attack froze somewhere in Sentinel’s throat. He could only watch in shock as the Quintesson ships began moving sluggishly, trying to turn to face the new enemies and not being fast enough. Hunter drones reacted better, though, gathering in swarms and engaging the Decepticons.

Then Trypticon’s heavy cannons came to life.

It was just one ship – albeit giant – and it couldn’t stand against the force of entire Quintesson fleet, but for now the Autobots cheered as the powerful laser rays hit the still maneuvering vessels, burning through the forcefields and hitting the hulls. And then, among all the chaos, Sentinel spotted a very distinct orange shape.

“Omega Supreme!” Sentinel bellowed, rising his fists. “Those traitors! They brought Decepticons upon us!”

“But sir, they seem to be fighting the Quintessons,” some of the officers dared to object, but before Sentinel could reprimand him, another soldier reported:

“Sentinel Magnus, sir, they’re hailing our frequencies. The Decepticons, I mean. The signal comes from Trypticon. Should I put them through?”

Sentinel swallowed his words yet again and gave a curt nod.

The main screen switched to the picture of a command bridge – and the ugly crude face of Strika, the Decepticon General of Destruction.

“Greetings, Autobots!” She sounded uncharacteristically jolly. “Is this your private game of punch-a-squid, or anyone can join?”

This couldn’t be. It was some sort of trick, it couldn’t be true. It was...

“Mangus, sir.” One of the younger Autobots – the one who argued with him before – was looking at him expectantly. “What do we do?”

Sentinel opened his mouth once more, prepared to give an order that he himself didn’t know yet – and then another voice cut through the haze of confusion.

“Sentinel!”

Slipstream was standing in the doorway, wings perked up and optics wide. He turned his head slowly to gaze at the femme, to take in her expression that he couldn’t quite read...

Slipstream. Red-eyed, sharp-clawed Decepticon femme. Who saved his life and became a... valuable ally.

Chin raised and shoulders broadened, Sentinel looked back at his soldiers.

“Activate all battle systems, open fire at the Quintessons ships! Now that they are clamped between two armies, it might be our best chance to get rid of them. Slipstream, take Jetfire and Jetstorm and join the fight. If the Quints decide to land, no ship must reach the surface!”

Something twinkled in the femme’s red optics – something Sentinel had never seen before. She clanked her heels and saluted to him.

“Yes, Magnus!”

Her smile could only be rivalled by the exhilarated grins of the Autobots activating the weapons.

It was time.

The blue swirl and dizziness of a space bridge dissolved, and the familiar sound of Optimus’s feet clanging against Iacon’s pavement made his spark skip a beat and then pound faster. The lighting, the sky above his head, the buildings beyond the space bridge nexus... All of this sang of home.

As did Bulkhead’s grinning face.

Optimus’s “hello” was muffled when Bulkhead simply grabbed him and pressed him to his wide chest. Sari, who went through the space bridge next, was only glad to join the hugging session.

Sadly, Bulkhead’s grin faded the moment another, heavier pair of feet hit the pavement behind Optimus. A small green-skinned man who was perching on Bulkhead’s shoulder, however, didn’t appear disappointed.

“It’s good to see you alive and well, Optimus Prime.” Izaran adjusted his clothes (that was ruffled after the hugs) and gave them a polite nod – the best he could do while clinging to Bulkhead’s shoulder guard. “We haven’t been introduced to each other, but it is an honor to meet you, Lord Megatron.”

“Likewise,” the warlord replied dryly.

“We are very grateful for your help,” Optimus interrupted. Megatron didn’t seem to have anything against organics when they weren’t messing with his plans, but the Prime preferred to be sure.

“It’s nothing.” Izaran waved his hand. “I told you, Optimus Prime: the ruling body of the Nebulon Republic doesn’t want to be Quintessons’ next target, which means that we need Cybertron strong. I am simply doing what’s best for my country.”

“Nevertheless, we are glad to have you on our side.”

“Enough pleasantries.” Megatron crossed his arms. “Forgive me, Ambassador, but we need to hurry.”

“Of course, of course,” Izaran agreed. “Good luck!”

“Yeah, good luck.” Bulkhead couldn’t stop glaring at Megatron, and when the warlord turned his back to him, Bulkhead grabbed Optimus’s arm.

“Please take care,” he murmured. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Optimus.”

Yeah, Optimus thought, I hope so too.

“I will,” he said out loud. “Thank you, Bulkhead.”

Megatron transformed to his jet mode, Optimus and Sari activated their jetpacks.

“Lead the way,” Optimus said, and they rose in the air.

They flew down the empty streets of Iacon – and further, further north, to the very pole of the planet. Iacon was located here for a reason: the ancestors of the Autobots built their sacred city as close to the life-giving well of Vector Sigma as possible, and as the three fliers neared the ancient ridges of the Well, Optimus got a suspicion.

[Megatron!] he called over the comm line. [Please tell me we aren’t going to fly into the Well of the All Sparks!]

[What is it, Optimus Prime? Afraid some nameless deity will strike you down?]

[But... It’s Vector Sigma! The Life-giver! The source that births newsparks! And we’re gonna just... just fly into it like some barbarians?!]

[Vector Sigma is an energy source; no more and no less. You held the Allspark in your hand, I held the Allspark *in my spark chamber*, and your little technorganic friend literally carries its power within her. I believe we’re not in the place to be superstitious. Besides, I used that way to get out of the Underworld, so I don’t know any other. You have suggestions?]

[...No,] Optimus had to admit. He hated to agree, but there was logic in Megatron’s words; still, he shivered as they flew by the ragged edge of the Well, and the black, cryptic maw of the tunnel gaped underneath them. It glowed blue during the harvest time, when newsparks were being born, but now it stood lifeless and vaguely threatening.

No Autobot had ever set a foot into this primordial abyss.

They hovered over the Well, and then Megatron dove into it first. Sari, having no idea about the legends surrounding this holy place, followed him, and Optimus had no choice. Closing his optics, he maneuvered his jetpack and flew in.

Gravity took them into its hold, speed increasing with every second as Optimus plummeted down, a flight that resembled a freefall. The light of the moon was left behind, but the darkness wasn't complete: when Optimus thought about switching on his flashlights, he realized he didn't need them.

Thin lines of faint blue biolights were running down the smooth walls of the Well, blinking and twinkling, pulsing like a living being's sparkbeat. In a strange way it resembled space, but where the starry sky was strewn with glimmering dots, here there were lines, woven together in a pattern too elaborate to comprehend at such speed.

[Wow!] Sari drawled at their common frequency. [It's so pretty!]

Optimus didn't answer, too caught in the moment, but in his mind he agreed with her. The walls were changing around them: the smooth polished metal was breaking into separate cables and plates, gaps and glowing clusters were beginning to appear here and there.

After what seemed like an eternity of a downward flight Megatron commed them both:

[Prepare yourselves, we're going to turn now.]

The warning came just in time: without it, Optimus could've missed the moment the Decepticon's grey mass ahead of him swerved and disappeared in one of the gaps. Sari and Optimus followed him, and there was no more time to marvel at the scenery: the passage they took was narrower and swiveled every other second, joining with other tunnels. Optimus could only wonder how Megatron oriented in this labyrinth.

Blue lights on the walls were becoming brighter and grew in numbers, illuminating the way quite well. It was an uncanny but fascinating picture; Optimus had always imagined Underworld to be dark and scary, but this place was anything but. Perhaps only the upper levels were scary, for the deeper they went, the brighter the lights glowed. Sometimes the tunnel took the three flyers to a cave whose ceiling was unseen in the haze above, sometimes they flew over ravines shimmering with energon crystals, once they passed a real energon waterfall... The Underworld looked magical, and Optimus wondered briefly what it had been like for Megatron, to roam around it without a care, exploring the depths no other Cybertronian had ever seen...

He had no chance to finish the thought, because they entered a hall greater than any they'd encountered before, and Megatron commed Optimus again:

[Look up.]

Optimus did – and saw it. Giant rings of thrusters that could belong to a titan, if such beings existed: black and cold, but oh-so-real. An evidence of Megatron's impossible dream.

And then they flew further, until finally Megatron transformed and stopped in mid-air.

“We're here.”

Optimus and Sari stopped too, hovering beside him. It was another spacious hall, round in shape, smaller than the one with thrusters, but impressive nonetheless. In its very middle stood a device that Optimus took for a strange metal flower at first. Perfectly round, as the hall itself, its shape broke into several layers, with constructs that resembled energy generators located around the

platform in the center, like petals around the core.

It did remind of some kind of energy beams focusing mechanism, Optimus supposed.

“Is this your weapon?” Sari asked, tilting her head. “Looks kinda small, all things considered.”

“Small but powerful.” Megatron pointed at the energy generators. “These things are linked to the entire chamber, the fuel lines running through the walls, ceiling and the floor all concentrate at them. We only need to understand how to activate and aim it.”

“That’s why you have me here.” Sari gave them two thumbs up. “Now let the professional work.”

They all landed at the weapon’s base, the soft clang echoing in the chamber. Sari wiped her hands, took a long breath, then stepped to the weapon and put her palms on it.

For a moment, nothing changed. And then hot wind blew around them, as if some colossal creature took a deep breath – and Sari’s eyes flared with blinding, striking blue.

“Step on the platform,” she said, her voice monotonous and booming, “and place your hands on the orb.”

“What orb..?” Optimus began, but a soft click answered him: the platform’s floor broke into separate plates, and a thin, elegant pillar rose from the opening, an orb of unknown alloy resting on its top.

“Sari?” Optimus’s gaze darted between his friend and the pillar. Sari had never sounded so strange when she “read” technology; what if something was...

“Hurry, Optimus!” Megatron called. “Do as she says.”

And the Prime obeyed. He joined Megatron on the platform, and the moment their hands met on top of the orb, it hummed, and the floor started vibrating and... moving? After the initial disorientation passed, Optimus realized what was going on: the room was turning! The passageway that they used to get inside disappeared behind the wall, but before fear could settle in, a different passage took its place, and with a thud the motion stopped.

After a klik of silence Optimus let go of the orb; his hands were trembling. Where the simple tunnel once was, now stood tall, elaborate doors; thin lines carved into their surface were highlighted by the familiar blue glimmer and combined into an image. Intricate circuit-like patterns came together to form a round shape in which Optimus recognized Cybertron; in its middle was the image of this very room, and there...

Two mechs stood there face-to-face, a smaller one and a bigger one. A third figure was depicted at their feet: a tiny femme with blocky frame and outstretched arms. The two upper figures each had a hand raised above their heads, and a beam came out of their joined fingers, piercing Cybertron’s surface and rising to the sky.

Like a giant sword.

Optimus gasped, his gaze fixed on the smaller mech’s figure. Now he could see it, every single detail the ancient myths spoke of and the art history books explained: a crown-like finial on the mech’s forehead, proto-Autobot symbols on his shoulders, a sheath at his thigh...

“Prima...” he breathed out. “Prima, the wielder of the legendary Star Saber...”

And just as he finished his phrase, Megatron began his.

“Requiem Blaster...” The warlord cast an unpleasant glance at him. “That, Optimus Prime, is Megatronus, my namesake; and the weapon he wields is called Requiem Blaster.”

Optimus opened his mouth to retort, but a clear, ringing laughter interrupted him.

“Oh, please...” Sari’s eyes were still glowing with that unnatural sheen, and her voice was solemn, like she was reciting a hymn. “Haven’t you realized it yet? This is Star Saber – *and* Requiem Blaster; a weapon from both of your legends. Can’t you see it? Prima and Megatronus wielded it *together*.”

Megatron was scandalized.

“How convenient! And who is the third person? I don’t remember that femme in the legend!”

Sari’s eyes unfocused.

“She... is Solus. A Mini-Con who accompanied Megatronus and Prima in their quest. A femme who could read the will of the Allspark; who could talk to...”

She froze mid-sentence. Convulsions ran through her body, sparks flew over her armor, she threw her head back – and her eyes flashed pure white.

“Sari!” Optimus jumped from the platform and caught her before the girl could collapse. “Sari!”

A deep, heavy rumble rolled through the chamber, and the doors opened.

Everything went quiet again; Sari was breathing peacefully in Optimus’s hand, as if asleep. Soft blue light was coming from the space beyond the doors.

“It appears she exhausted herself by commanding the passage to open.” Megatron hopped down too. “Come; perhaps there we’ll find the way to activate the Blaster.”

Optimus wanted to snap at him, to say that Sari’s condition was important... But she did appear healthy, and they did have a planet to save. Still, he couldn’t help but hesitate, just to arrange Sari more comfortably on his palm, so Megatron went ahead of him; and it was Megatron’s voice that really got Optimus’s attention.

“It appears I was wrong to believe that Cybertron is a giant warship.”

“Huh?” Optimus lifted his gaze and discovered that Megatron had already entered the second hall – and was standing in the doorway, motionless.

“It’s not a warship. It’s a living being.”

“What?!” Optimus’s jaw dropped. “How do you know that?”

“Because I’m looking at its spark chamber.”

It was a spark chamber indeed, although Optimus couldn’t really see the entirety of it, the farther walls of the enormous hall disappearing in the blue mist. But the ball of pure light above them, comparing in size to a small moon, its energy in a slow, but never ending flux – that was a spark. A true, living spark.

“How can it be?” Optimus whispered, any louder tone suddenly feeling disrespectful. “What is... *Who is it?*”

“He... is Primus.” Sari stirred in his palm and sat up, her arms still wobbly. “The creator of life on Cybertron... The body of Cybertron itself.”

“Impossible.” Megatron shook his head, although he didn’t seem to be very convinced in his own words. “All this time... We’ve been living on another creature’s body? Like... parasites?”

“Like *children*.” Sari activated her jetpack and flew to the ground. “I... I got a glimpse of him when I talked to the weapon system. It was him who opened the doors for me. I think... I think I can talk to him too.” She flexed her fingers. “There is nothing here for me to touch, but I can try to connect to the spark’s energy, and...”

She didn’t get to finish; just like before, her body suddenly stiffened, dazzling light beamed out of her eyes, but this time it continued to grow, surrounding her frame, clouding around her... And when she spoke again, her voice came out low, distorted.

“You... Are not those who came before.”

Optimus could only stare, paralyzed, and it was Megatron who answered:

“‘Who came before’? You mean Megatronus and Prima?”

“You... Bear the same names. But not them.” Despite the eerie, outworldly sound, the voice seemed confused. *“You... I remember you.”* He addressed Megatron directly now. *“Little wanderer... Came here once. Alone and afraid, needed fuel. Gave you fuel, so that you stopped hunting my creations. Safe now.”*

“So that’s where that energon spring came from...” Megatron had the decency to look ashamed. “I, um... Thank you.” He squirmed; normally he would deny any accusations of weakness and fear, but the loving care of Cybertron itself was... something out of his league, to be frank. “Are you the one who created us?”

“Yes... Created workers... To build and nurture. Created warriors... To guard and protect. Created caretakers... To watch over them. Didn’t help... Children put out each other’s sparks. Warrior children... left. Allspark... gone. But gave new life on a different world.” His voice filled with warmth. *“Child of another world carries the Allspark’s power now. Part Cybertronian, part other. Didn’t plan, but came out good.”*

“Then can you help us?” Old fire returned to Megatron; he clenched his fists, and for a moment Optimus thought that he saw Megatron from the recruitment videos, Megatron who was ready to throw his world into eternal war if it could save his people. “You have weapons, you have flight engines – you can crush the Quintessons once and for all!”

A soft rumble rattled the floor under their feet.

“No... Cannot transform. Cannot move. Gave parts of spark... to create new sparks. Gave another part... to create the Allspark, so that children can fly to the stars. So that children are free... not bound to me. I... cannot be free anymore.”

Sari’s eyes began flickering at these words, and Optimus dropped to his knees.

“Sari!” He looked up at the giant spark above them. “Stop, please! You are hurting her! You can’t use her body anymore!”

“The Requiem Blaster!” Megatron cried out in haste. “Is there a way to use the weapon?!”

“Yes... You can use it.” Sari’s EM field was going haywire. *“Enemies from beyond the sky... Came before. The two of you can stop them... Like before.”*

“How? How?!” Megatron was shouting now.

“Enough!” Optimus’s yell cut him off. “Leave her!”

And Primus did. The blue glow around Sari faded, and she went limp in Optimus’s lap.

“You idiot! We didn’t learn how to fire the damn cannon!” Megatron’s optics were pale, but Optimus didn’t care.

“Shut up,” he muttered as Sari groaned and opened her eyes. “Sari? How are you?”

“I’m... fine. Surprisingly.” She grinned. “Your god has a pretty intense presence.”

“What does it matter, if we don’t know how to repel the Quintessons?!” Megatron wasn’t quite done raging.

“Relax, big guy.” Sari waved at him. “Primus might not talk to you directly, but I spent enough time connected to his spark. I know what to do.”

That seemed to calm Megatron down a bit.

“Very well, child. Explain.”

“So basically, it’s not the first time the Quints try to take over you guys.” Sari rose to her feet with Optimus’s help. “They attempted it a long time ago – as you have probably already guessed, they were those ‘enemies from beyond the sky’ from your myths. Cybertronians had no idea of interstellar travel back then, but the Quints were still awed by the sheer concept of sentient robots. Their conquest failed, though.”

“So that’s why the Quintesson judges wanted our heads,” Optimus mused out loud. “They said that we were supposed to answer for the crimes of our ancestors – namely Prima and Megatronus, who thwarted their plans.”

Sari nodded sagely.

“Cybertron was most likely their source of inspiration for cyberformation of their own home planet – a failed cyberformation, judging by your tales of Quintessa. No wonder they want your world so much; probably have been wallowing in envy and spite all these millennia.”

“Well they’re not getting it!” Megatron growled. “Do not test our patience, child; how do we activate the weapon?”

“Easy: you stand on the platform and use your spark energy to ignite the generators. And there’s a condition: you both must be willing to do it.”

Megatron squinted.

“If it’s so easy, how come I couldn’t activate it before?”

“Because it can only be activated by the representatives of both of Primus’s peoples.” Sari smiled as she watched Megatron’s face. “And you represented only one.”

“You mean... That only a warbuild and a civilian *together* can fire it?”

Sari’s grin only widened.

“It’s wise, don’t you think? This way it can’t be used by one race against the other.”

Megatron had nothing to say to that, so Optimus used this opportunity to ask:

“What about that femme from the relief, Solus? You said that was her name?”

“Yes. She belonged to the race of Mini-Cons, the caretakers Primus mentioned. She had the ability to understand the language Primus’s subsystems spoke. She learned of the weapon in the depths of Cybertron and she led Megatronus and Prima here. The Mini-Cons *are* neutral, after all... And their main task seems to be watching over Cybertron and being the link between your races. Which didn’t really work, by the way, but oh well. You guys are pretty stubborn.”

“So she had the same power you do.” Megatron ignored her jab. “What a *coincidence*.”

“No, no, this is actually pretty understandable!” Optimus cut in, his optics lighting up. “Sari got her power when she integrated with her key, which was charged by the Allspark itself! And the Allspark used to be part of Primus! Maybe this was why the Allspark chose you.” Optimus regarded her with wonder. “Maybe it knew that we’d need you.”

“And maybe the Quints somehow felt its energy, and that’s why they didn’t attack Earth!” Sari clapped her hands. “They were afraid I – um, I mean, the Allspark – would kick their asses again!”

“And it would!” Optimus couldn’t stop smiling. “With your help, we’ll be able to drive them away!”

Megatron let out a theatrical cough.

“Well, if we’re done solving ancient mysteries, I would very much like to fire the Blaster.” He scowled. “It’s me who’s risking his entire army in this gamble.”

He was right, although Optimus would’ve phrased it differently. People were fighting and dying out there; they had to act quickly.

They climbed onto the platform again. The orb thrummed with joy when they touched it, and Optimus smiled at the contrast: his blue hand seemed so small and fancy when laid on top of Megatron’s broad black palm. He raised his gaze and caught Megatron studying his face.

“We should open our sparks, I suppose,” the Decepticon said. “Never thought I would bare my spark to you under such conditions.”

“You have bared your spark to me already,” Optimus tried to joke to soothe that silent yearning in his chest. “When we fought on board Omega Supreme, remember?”

“How could I forget? You nearly killed me back then.” Megatron was joking too, but Optimus didn’t find it funny; if anything, it made his spark ache.

“I’m glad I didn’t,” he murmured, and the plating on his chest split. He felt awfully exposed like this, with blue shimmer washing over his face and no way to hide how fast his spark was beating, but Megatron didn’t comment on it; he simply let the plating on his chest open. Soft purple glow mixed with the rays of blue.

The floor under their feet shook again, and the passageway to Primus's spark chamber disappeared.

"We're moving again!" Sari grabbed one of the generators to stay on her feet. The generator hummed and vibrated too. "It's starting!"

"Get away from it!" Optimus held onto Megatron's hand for dear life and suppressed the urge to physically take Sari to a safe place. "It can harm you if it activates!"

Sari ran to the wall, and just in time: bolts of energy began crackling over the generators, and the orb under Megatron's hand heated up. Biolight lines akin to those that decorated the doors to Primus fired up on the pillar and the platform, feverishly bright, and crawled from the orb up Optimus's arm. When Optimus glanced at Megatron again, his vents hitched: same circuit-like patterns were running over the warlord's plating, only purple instead of blue. If Optimus looked anything like Megatron right now – and he believed he did – it seemed like he was wearing ancient tribal paint, with every inch of his frame and face illuminated by jagged lines and circles.

Then the chamber stopped, the ceiling retracted like a shell, and there was starry sky above them, colored by the far-off flares of lasers.

"We moved... to the surface?!" Optimus managed to shout over the increasing buzz of the invisible engines.

"It's the Well! We're atop of the Well!" Megatron shouted back. "How do we aim this thing?!"

"Just will it!" Sari yelled from her place near the wall. "It's a part of Primus, it'll respond to your sparks' intention!"

"Sari, get out of here!!!"

Luckily, she didn't argue this time; with a roar from her jetpack Sari was gone.

Optimus locked optics with Megatron – and there was the same resigned determination there. They nodded to each other and stepped closer.

[Sentinel!] Slipstream's voice over the commlink distracted him from watching the monitor where the space battle unfurled. [Sentinel, you've gotta see this!]

[I'm busy!] he growled, but the femme ignored it.

[No, seriously, you've gotta look at the glowing over the Well! I might be mistaken, but there's somebody there...]

[Wait, what glowing?!] Sentinel grabbed the control panel and switched the view on the monitor. [By the Allspark...]

There was blue light coming out of the Well of the All Sparks; like a shimmering cocoon, it surrounded a strange device the likes of which Sentinel had never seen before – and definitely not over the mystical Well!

And there, in the midst of that cocoon, two small figures could be seen, two silhouettes that resembled mechs...

[What the... Can everyone see that?!]

[I believe yes,] Slipstream replied. [It'd be hard not to; I bet half of Iacon is up and about, considering the battle and all, and this display is kinda hard to miss.]

Loud gasps from the mechs behind him only confirmed Slipstream's theory.

The energy generators buzzed and hissed around them, and the circuit patterns burned as if they were being branded into Optimus's plating; he could barely tell apart his surroundings because of the light, but Megatron's face was clear as ever – and he was gritting his fangs, purple lines simmering. Both of their sparks pulsed heavily, thrashing in their chambers, overworked and distressed, and it felt like an invisible string was driving Optimus's spark out, forcing it to join the blue radiance.

This was the moment when he realized that he might not survive the experience.

And there, at the edge of his consciousness, he sensed an answering thought, a faint understanding. Optimus peered into Megatron's red optics and saw resolve; a weak smile crept to Optimus's lips – and without a word they leaned into each other, bringing their sparks together.

The floor gave under their feet, their frames being pulled up into the air, if there *was* air – for Optimus could see nothing but the light, a brilliant radiance terrible and omnipresent, potent beyond measure, beautiful beyond comparison, it engulfed them and whirled around them and they were its center – so Optimus held onto Megatron's hand, which was the last real thing in the luminous sea...

Optimus squeezed Megatron's hand, felt it squeeze his in return – and they fired.

They didn't see it, but Sentinel did – as did the citizens of Iacon and the refugees from the colonies, all those who went out of their houses to gawk at the mystic light rising over the Well; as did the Decepticons who fought the Quintesson ships and drones up at Cybertron's orbit. They all saw it: a beam of dazzling light bursting from the depths of the planet, piercing the atmosphere like a giant sword and dispersing; a wave of energy rolling over and around Cybertron, leaving Quintesson ships dark and paralyzed and passing through Autobots and Decepticons with no harm.

And then it faded, the remnants of the energy dancing in the sky over Cybertron like a blue aurora.

The platform in the middle of the Well was calm and quiet; the pillar with the orb retracted, leaving only the two mechs lying on the floor. Scorched black marks were smoking in place where sacred patterns once shone; sparks thumped hard and strained, electricity crackling over their damaged confinements.

Megatron was the first to come to his senses. He shifted, propped himself on his elbows and blinked, trying to stop the world from spinning. His vision was glitching, not all colors registered correctly, but the bright hues of Optimus Prime's paintjob stood out even in his corrupt feed.

“Optimus..?” Megatron reached for the Autobot and shook his shoulder.

“Mmmh...” Megatron wasn't even surprised anymore by the amount of relief he felt when Optimus mumbled something and raised his head.

“M-megatron...” And another stab to his spark when Optimus smiled at him, still out of it and so openly happy to see him. “Did we... Did it work?”

Megatron touched his commlink and paused, listening.

“Strika is telling me that they are boarding the Quintesson ships at the moment. It appears this weapon didn’t kill them, but simply disabled all non-Cybertronian tech in range. And with how much they rely on technology... They’re helpless.”

“Good...” Optimus managed to crawl to Megatron and drop back on the floor by his side. “And we’re alive too...”

“Yes.” Megatron lifted his hand and stroked the burns on Optimus’s cheek with unexpected gentleness. “We are.”

Optimus beamed at him – but then his optics focused on something behind Megatron’s back, and his antennas twitched.

“Megatron!” He grabbed the warlord’s wrist. “Megatron, look!”

The Decepticon spun around, following Optimus’s gaze, and froze. There, at the bottom of the platform, nested in the metallic surface, was a spark – and another one to its left, and yet another one in the corner, and more near the opposite wall... They were pulsing steadily, soft and fragile against the cooling air, some of them pure blue – and some with purple in their cores!

“Newsparks... The energy of Primus must’ve created the newsparks! It’s a weapon, but it’s his energy still. And it must’ve taken both of our sparks as templates!” Optimus pointed to the purple dots. “Look, those are Decepticon ones! Megatron..?”

He turned to the warlord to see why he was silent, and the words got stuck in his vocalizer. Megatron was staring at the newsparks with wide optics – and on his lips a smile was forming; not a cocky grin, not a tired smirk of irony, but a true, honest, happy smile, and suddenly Megatron looked young again, like eons of war and exile loosened their grip on him.

Optimus stroked his cheek – a touch mirroring Megatron’s own gesture a klik ago.

“We have won our planet back,” Optimus said firmly, “and we can all go home.”

Megatron didn’t reply; instead he pulled Optimus towards him and brushed their lips together. Optimus wrapped his arms around the warlord’s neck and moaned, kissing back with the same eagerness. His entire frame hurt, his burns were aching, but joy bubbled in his chest, and Optimus laughed into the kiss, clinging to Megatron, feeling free like never before.

Somewhere in the background he heard the howl of the jet thrusters, surprised exclamations that sounded kind of like Jetfire and Jetstorm, and Sari’s voice answering them, but right now he didn’t care.

On top of an ancient weapon, among the nests of newsparks, injured and exhausted and half-alive, Optimus Prime and Megatron were kissing, and for once Optimus didn’t have doubts about the future at all.

Chapter End Notes

So this is it, everyone! The final chapter. There will be a short epilogue after, but the general story is complete. Hope you enjoyed it!

(As you can see, The Fifth Element is one of my favorite movies ever.)

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~30 stellar cycles later~

The sky over Iacon was clear, no acid rainclouds or electric storms in sight – the perfect day for travel. The weather wouldn't matter if the journey was within the borders of the Cybertronian Alliance, since one could simply enter one of the space bridges of the Nexus and exit on some far-off colony. But if one wanted to reach Nebulos, it would be wiser to take a ship, use the space bridge at Luna-2 and then fly on their own. This was exactly such case: Ambassador Izaran was coming home after his long service as a Nebulan representative on Cybertron.

The official ceremony was yesterday, but Optimus used his position of an old friend to come see the old Nebulan off. It was strange to think of Izaran as “old”; Optimus still couldn't get used to how fleeting the lives of organics were. Sari's technorganic nature didn't help: after she reached her twenties she simply stopped aging. Optimus told her once – jokingly – that when the Earthlings developed proper space travel, she could become their permanent ambassador, but Sari just smiled sadly:

“They'll never make me their ambassador, big guy. Powell has already made it known that, legally speaking, I don't exist. And no Earth government would trust someone who's more Cybertronian than human.” She shook her head. “I doubt I will even be able to take over dad's company, so... I'd prefer to stay with you guys, if you don't mind.”

“After dad dies” was left unsaid.

“Are you alright, Optimus Prime? You look unhappy.”

“Huh?” Optimus snapped out of his memories and blinked at Izaran, who was sitting on his repulsor platform across the table at the spaceport's lounge. “Oh, sorry. I was just... thinking about you organics. How fast the time flies by for you. This is something you can teach us: to value the time we have.”

“I'd say you're doing that pretty well.” Izaran sipped from his cup. “It has been only thirty years, and look at your people! Kaon is repopulated, there is trade between Decepticon and Autobot worlds, and I've been seeing mixed couples in the streets.”

Optimus chuckled.

“I believe Megatron and I set quite an example. Every yellow magazine on the planet considered it its duty to give thorough reports of our life.”

“It turned out for the best, didn't it? When the leaders of the Alliance are involved with each other, then surely it's okay for common citizens to look the other race's way.”

“Please,” Optimus cringed, “I'm not the Autobot leader; Sentinel is. I'm just a Prime.”

Izaran's face became solemn.

“You're not a Prime, you're *the* Prime. Haven't you heard how the Autobots call you? ‘Our Prime.’ They don't need to specify which one, everybody knows it's you they mean. I'm not an

official Ambassador anymore, so I can say undiplomatic things.” Izaran grinned. “Sentinel might be the Magnus, but it’s your opinion that really matters. General Strika listens to you, which is something few ever managed to achieve, and her consort is ever ready to punch anyone who speaks ill of you.”

Optimus winced.

“I’d really prefer if he didn’t,” he mumbled. Now he understood Megatron’s apathetic exasperation at Lugnut’s praises: apparently, this was the stage that went after embarrassment, anger and denial.

Izaran just laughed.

“What I mean to say is that I won’t be surprised if the title of Magnus will become pretty nominal in the nearest future.”

“Let’s... not make far-fetched assumptions.” Optimus didn’t like discussing political situation in the Autobot High Command. His meeting with Sentinel after the victory over the Quintessons was... weird, to say the least. He had been so worried about it, about facing Sentinel’s accusations of treason and fraternizing with the enemy, but then they did meet at last... With a strange detachment Optimus realized that Sentinel’s insults didn’t faze him anymore. So he told Sentinel his opinion on the matter, how peace and freedom of Cybertron were top priorities and how he found a way to reach them. And the Council listened to him.

As for Sentinel – Optimus would never forget the shocked, slack-jawed expression on his face when he realized that he couldn’t boss Optimus around anymore.

It was... a pleasant feeling. Maybe it helped Optimus to understand his Decepticon allies more.

Still, it wasn’t right to make their private disagreements public.

“Sentinel has been setting an example too,” Optimus noted neutrally.

“You mean the Seeker femme, Slipstream? To be honest, I have no idea what she sees in him, with these jealous fits he throws every other day.”

“She says she finds them cute. But then, she has a part of Starscream’s personality, and Starscream was... an odd one.”

“So I have heard.” Izaran nodded.

“And the reintegration hasn’t been going as smoothly as you try to paint it.” Optimus frowned, fingers tightening around his cube. “Megatron kept his promise to set their ‘workforce’ free, but you have no idea how much it cost me to persuade him not to simply leave the slaves be, but to get them back to their home planets and share resources with them! And then convince his followers that using slaves for menial work is *wrong*.” He gritted his dental plates. “I know it was my idea to bring Decepticons back to Cybertron, but damn; sometimes I just... feel like they all are glitched and lack some basic moral programming.”

“And yet you have friends among them.”

“Yes... I do.” Optimus sighed, took a sip and then waved his hand. “Okay, don’t mind my blabbering; it’s just frustration speaking. I learned quite well that Autobots can be just as cruel. And now we all got a second chance, a chance to start all over.”

“And it’s working out already.” Izaran sent him an encouraging smile. “Look at Omega Supreme;

he was created for war with the Decepticons, but now he has a Decepticon friend!"

"Who brags about it on every corner," Optimus chuckled, but his mood was lifted. Scratch might've been using his friendship with Omega to get even with his former bullies, but he did genuinely care for the shipformer. Even Ratchet admitted it.

"You will do well, Optimus Prime; I believe in you." Izaran put aside his empty cup. "Now that I'm retiring, I'm going to write a new textbook on Cybertronian politics for the future generations of diplomats. I rely on you to stay in power long enough for my great-grandchildren to still live off the book's reprints."

"I'll do my best. But you have to promise to send me a copy; can't wait to read your advice on dealing with Megatron."

"I'm afraid the book will be our governmental secret." Izaran winked at him. "But I have faith in your intelligence; I'm sure they'll be able to snatch one."

The simultaneous beeping of Optimus's and Izaran's communicators stopped any further discussion: the ship was ready.

They were crossing the airfield when the familiar sound of flight engines filled the air, and a muffled thud of three bots landing came from behind. Optimus could recognize those engines anywhere; with a smile, he turned around.

"Ambassador." Megatron inclined his head. "I have come to wish you a safe journey. This is your escort." He gestured to his companions.

"Sir, yes, sir!" The Jettwins saluted, their faces comically serious. They still resembled sparklings playing officers for the most part, but anyone who saw them during the last battle with the Quintessons knew better than to underestimate them.

"Thank you, Lord Megatron." Izaran made a deep bow and then looked them all over. "I'm grateful for your hospitality; it was a pleasure to serve on Cybertron. I wish you all the best. Farewell!"

As the Nebulan ship grew smaller and smaller in the sky above, the Jettwins dancing in spirals around it, Megatron stepped closer to Optimus.

"Watching organics does make you value time, doesn't it?" he said, putting one hand on Optimus's shoulder.

"It does." Optimus chuckled at how similar their thoughts, apparently, ran. He contemplated his choices for a moment, but then allowed himself to lean on Megatron's abdomen. Optimus didn't really reach the warlord's chest, which made him a little self-conscious about public shows of affection, but they were alone and... ah, screw it.

Megatron's field rang with amusement, but it was a kind, inoffensive one.

"We lost so much time fighting each other..." Optimus sighed, relaxing into the embrace. He didn't specify whether he meant the two of them or the Autobots and Decepticons in general. "I don't want to lose a klik more." They'd been together for thirty stellar cycles already, the bond between their sparks made everything clear as day, yet now Optimus wondered why he had never said it aloud. He closed his optics, letting the sudden urge take him. "I love you, my warlord."

The Decepticon's field flared around them and then was drawn tight. Megatron coughed.

Optimus didn't rush him.

"I... Don't want to lose more time, too. I'm old, after all." It earned him an elbow jab from Optimus, and Megatron laughed.

"I love you too, my Prime," he said after a pause. Megatron was surprised how easy it was; all the years he'd spent at the little Autobot's side he avoided the dreaded words. It didn't seem to harm their bond in any way – after all, after the spark merge in the center of Primus's weapon there weren't many secrets left between them. Besides, Optimus didn't speak of it either.

But now that the words had come out, it actually felt... good? They were still free; they were just... more honest.

Optimus threw back his head to look at Megatron, and the Decepticon brushed his finial.

"And since we decided not to waste any time, how about we fly home right now and, hmm... use it well?"

The tip of Optimus's antenna heated up under his fingers, but the Prime's smile only broadened.

"I like this plan." He raised his hand to trace the underside of Megatron's chestplate. "Let's do this."

Peace was going to be a good thing, and for once Megatron trusted an Autobot on this.

Chapter End Notes

Okay everyone, this is the end! Officially. :)

Thank you all for reading this story and leaving wonderful reviews and kudos. I hope you enjoyed the ride!

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